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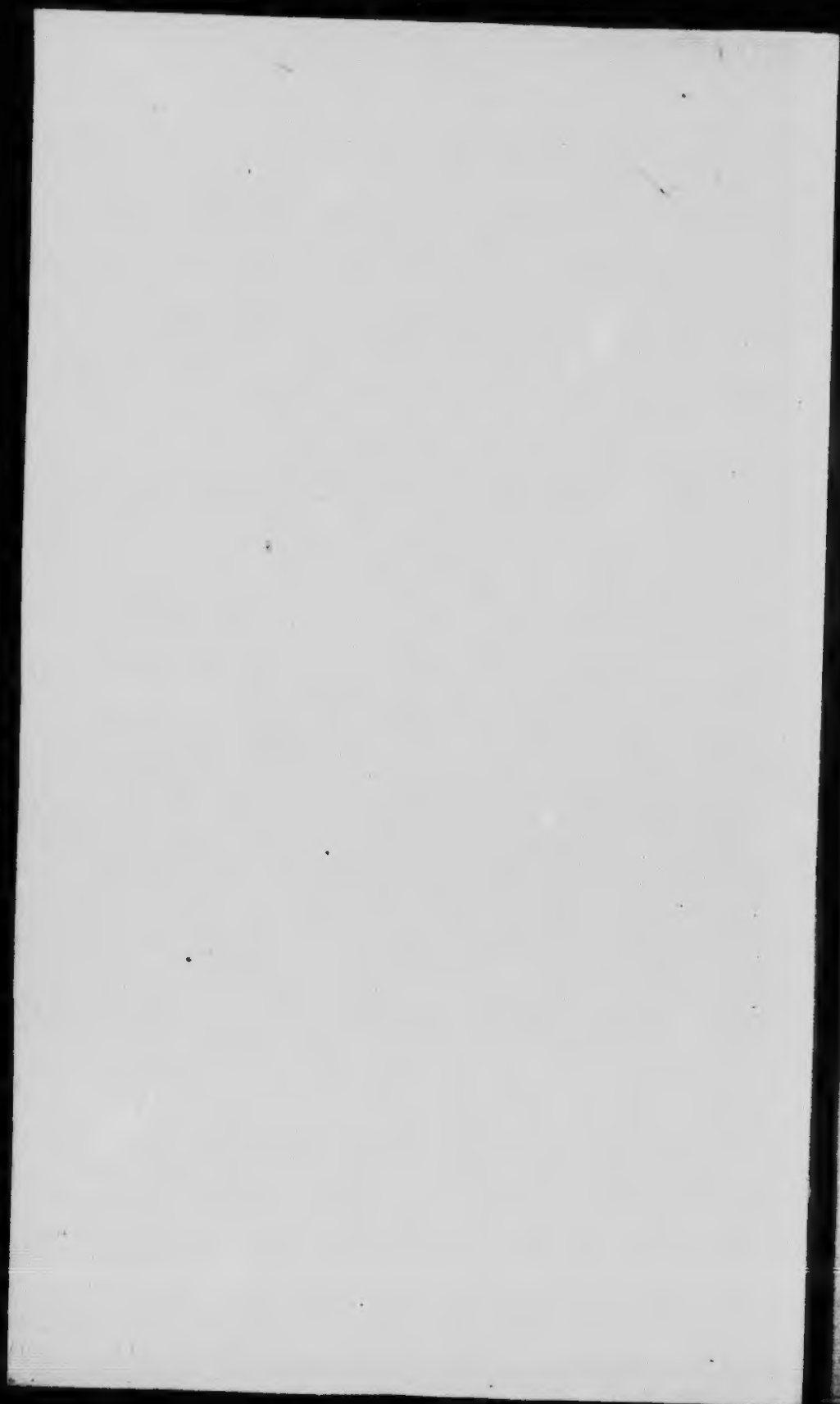
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# The Pelicans

By

E. M. Delafield

*Author of*

*"Zella Sees Herself," "The War-Workers," etc.*

McCLELLAND, GOODCHILD & STEWART  
PUBLISHERS . . . . . TORONTO

016008



PR6007

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P44

1918

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*Printed in Great Britain*

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To  
**MABEL LLOYD**

**WITHOUT WHOSE ENDURING FRIENDSHIP MY BOOKS  
WOULD NOT HAVE COME TO BEING.**

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"As a matter of fact—although one hates to say such a thing——" Lady Argent paused, in order to give the thing its full conversational value. "As a matter of absolute fact, those poor children are really to be congratulated."

"Because they are left orphans at five years old?"

"How you exaggerate, Ludovic! Rosamund is quite fourteen, and the little one can't be less than ten or eleven years old. And she wasn't much of a mother to them, poor thing."

"Well, what form did her modified motherhood take?"

"Ludovic, she is dead, after all," Lady Argent reminded her son. "But she was so much absorbed in her music, and they didn't get any proper education, as far as one knows. And then, of course, during this last year she was quite obviously dying—she ought really to have been in a sanatorium."

"She must have been quite young," said Ludovic Argent reflectively.

"Only about seven- or eight-and-thirty. Don't you remember when she first settled here, just after the husband died, and we were all so excited about this pretty young widow and that enormous grand piano that had to be forced in at the front-door with such difficulty?"

"I suppose I was at Oxford then, since I don't remember the sensation which the grand piano must indeed have caused, if they got it through the front-door of that small place."

Ludovic Argent and his mother both gazed across the valley below, because the front-door under discussion was immediately opposite their own, although separated from it by two slopes of hill and the River Wye. Only the window-panes twinkling in the afternoon sun were visible.

"And what will happen to her grand piano now? I suppose it will have to be got out again," said Ludovic nonchalantly.

"That's what I was just telling you," Lady Argent mistakenly assured him. "In a way they really are to be congratulated, poor little things. I believe Bertie Tregaskis is going to look after them."

"Is that the woman who pervades Cornwall with model dairies and good works generally, and if so, what is she doing in this *galère*?"

"She was a cousin of Mrs. Grantham's, and the very day after Mrs. Grantham became so much worse Bertie was down here to see after those poor little girls. So exactly like her, because it wasn't a particularly near relationship or anything—simply one of her magnificent, generous impulses. They really have nobody, poor waifs; the mother doesn't seem to have had any belongings at all, or if she had, they are Hungarians of sorts, and much better not raked up, in all probability."

"It is difficult to see who is available to do the raking, certainly," Ludovic admitted.

"Oh, Bertie would do anything that was *right*, of course, but she's simply solved the whole problem by saying she'll take them home with her. A woman who's got more responsibilities already than anyone I know—and a child of her own besides—it really is rather magnificent of her, Ludovic."

"But haven't they got any guardian or anything?"

"Nothing at all. That's one of the things that shows you what poor Mrs. Grantham was. Although she must have known for at least a year that she was dying, she never made any sort or kind of will. As a matter of fact I don't suppose she had anything to leave, and the father's money is safely secured for the two girls, Bertie says."

"So Mrs. Tregaskis won't have to take them for charity, so to speak?"

"Oh no! I don't think even she could do that, wonderful manager though she is. She's not at all well off. But of course it's everything for girls of that age—or of any age, for that matter—to have a home. And

she'll be such a mother to them! She always says she was meant to be the mother of a large family and is wasted with just one little girl."

"So the children are to be congratulated," remarked Ludovic meditatively, as though summing up the situation.

"Well," said his mother apologetically, "you know what I mean. Poor Mrs. Grantham was so ill, and she really was erratic—those long earrings, and all that music, and she seemed altogether more Hungarian than English, which was natural enough, I dare say, but not the best sort of thing for the daughters of an English father. One wouldn't say anything unkind for the world—*de mortuis*—you know what I mean, dear, though I can never recollect the end of that proverb—or is it some sort of text?"

"I know what you mean," Ludovic gravely assured her.

This untruth had been for many years his conversational *cheval-de-bataille* in intercourse with his mother.

"You always do, darling," she returned gratefully. "So much more like a daughter than a son."

She sighed, and Ludovic wondered if the sigh were a tribute to the thought of her own non-existent daughter, or to the infirmity which had kept her only son at home, to limp his way through life in the Wye valley.

"Anyway," his mother concluded as though presenting a final solution, "Bertie is bringing the poor children here this afternoon to say good-bye to me. It will be very good for them to come out, and Bertie is so wonderfully broad-minded—there's no conventional nonsense about her. I do want you to meet her, Ludovic."

"Very well, mother dear. I'm rather curious, I've heard so much about her."

Towards five o'clock of that crisp October afternoon, Ludovic Argent's curiosity was gratified.

He limped into the library and found his mother in earnest conversation with her friend.

Bertha Tregaskis was a woman of forty-five, and the dominant impression produced upon Ludovic was one of intense capability. Her strong black hair, untouched



with grey, sprang crisp and wiry from a capacious forehead, and the broad contour of her strong face revealed innumerable lines, hinting at the many activities indicated by Lady Argent. Her white, rather prominent teeth were freely revealed as she greeted Ludovic with the sane, ample smile in which she seemed to envelop all her surroundings.

"This is a sad expedition of mine, but I'm very glad to meet Sybil's son at last; I've heard of you so often."

Her voice was very much what he had expected from her appearance—full, rather deep, and with a native decision of utterance.

"And I of you, from my mother and—in Cornwall."

"Ah, Cornwall!" She laughed outright. "I be Carnish wumman, sure 'nuff."

Her instant assumption of the Cornish burr, natural and almost instinctive though it appeared to be, irritated Ludovic.

With a quickness of perception which he was to learn was characteristic of her, Mrs. Tregaskis appeared to perceive it.

"I suspect you heard of me as 'Miss Bertie,' since I am never allowed to be anything else down there. I do believe that half Cornwall knew me as 'Miss Bertie' until I married, and the name has stuck. At home, when I'm in the village with Hazel, all the old women stand at their doors and tell each other 'tis Miss Bertie and her l'il maid."

"'L'il maid'—how perfectly priceless," murmured the sympathetic Lady Argent, as in duty bound. Ludovic, again conscious of unreasonable annoyance, found himself wondering captiously whether anyone ever spoke of anyone else as a "l'il maid" outside the pages of a novel in dialect, his pet aversion. The phrase seemed too probable to be possible.

"Have you come from the Granthams' place?" he demanded abruptly, impelled by a vicious desire to abandon the cloying topic of "Miss Bertie" and the atmosphere of local adulation of which she seemed to him redolent.

Where else should she have come from? He was



aware that the question was ridiculous to the verge of impoliteness, but she replied, with all her armour of cheery friendliness unimpaired: "Yes, I've brought those two poor little girls, but your mother very kindly let them go out and play in the garden. So much better for them, after being shut up these last few days. I shall be very glad to get them home to-morrow; a change is the only thing."

Her eyes, charged with kindly meanings, sought the sympathetic response of Lady Argent's gaze.

"Of course it is. And they are too young to feel any wrench at leaving the place. It will probably be a relief to get right away from the atmosphere—and then, of course, they'll love to be with your Hazel."

"They've seen far too little of other children, and so, for the matter of that, has Hazel," declared Bertha Tregaskis briskly. "I expect half a dozen rows royal to begin with, but the prospect doesn't daunt me, on the whole."

"I'm sure you'll cope with all and any of it," returned Lady Argent with a glance of fond admiration.

Ludovic felt sure of it too, but his sureness was untempered by either fondness or admiration.

He felt a strong desire to be matter-of-fact, almost disagreeable as far as possible, in this atmosphere of competent kindness.

"I shall go and fetch them in to tea," he announced, reaching for his stick that was almost a crutch.

"Do, dear."

As he went out at the French window Ludovic heard his mother murmuring wistfully: "He is so fond of children."

He knew that she fostered this idea because she wished him to marry. He told himself that, in point of fact, he was not fond of children at all, and supposed that she based her assertion on an isolated liking for the intelligent small boy of an under-gardener.

Presently he saw the two children, in very modified mourning, under a great ilex-tree at the bottom of the garden. They were sitting on a bench side by side, very quietly, but they both rose at the sound of his crutch on the gravel.

## THE PELICANS

"How do you do?" said Ludovic gravely, and shook hands with them both.

His first thought was that it was not fair to speak of Rosamund Grantham, at all events, as a child, to bring her out to tea, as though she were in need of childish diversion to make her forget a childish sorrow, to send her to play in the garden. He thought that perhaps she also had felt it so. Resentment smouldered in her dark-ringed eyes, and in the sulkily-cut lines of her very beautiful mouth.

There was much to recall the Slavonic type in her, in the high moulding of the cheek-bones, the straight, rather blunt nose, opaque ivory complexion, and straight black brows. Her eyes, sombre and heavy-lidded, were of a colour seldom seen in England—the true tint of clear deep grey. Her build, however, showed no trace of a squat, square-standing, Hungarian ancestry. She was very tall for her thirteen years, but gave the impression of having already almost attained to her full growth. Straight and square-shouldered, she was far too thin for beauty, from the defiant curve of neck and upheld chin to the long slim fingers, betraying sensitiveness in every outstanding blue vein and narrowed finger-tip.

Ludovic Argent, then and thereafter thought that he had never seen a creature more at odds with her world and her passionate unbalanced self, than was Rosamund Grantham.

Frances, her face at eleven years old already bearing the impress of the dreamer in the steadfast gaze of eyes as grey as those of her sister, gave a sense of reliance and purposefulness that seemed to Ludovic amazing. Her small face had a classical delicacy of outline, her mouth was pathetically childish. Both had the same very soft brown hair growing in a curious little point on the low square forehead, and seeming too light in colour and texture for the dark brows and lashes beneath.

Both greeted Ludovic with serious self-possession, but Frances smiled at him a little, timidly, revealing teeth that sloped inwards.

"My mother sent me to tell you that tea is ready. She is in the library with Mrs. Tregaskis," he said.

"Shall we come, then?" murmured Rosamund conventionally. Her manner was that of a princess, and he surmised that whatever the Hungarian past of Mrs. Grantham might have concealed, a very secure assurance in her own ineradicable birthright and breeding had descended to her daughter.

"You have been here before, I know," he said, as they walked towards the house. "I expect I was at Oxford, or abroad," he added hastily, cursing himself for the allusion which might recall expeditions with the dead mother.

But Rosamund adjusted the trend of the conversation as easily as she adjusted her pace to his halting steps.

"How nice to go abroad," she said wistfully. "You must know a lot of places. Have you been to Russia?"

"No," said Ludovic, and almost found himself asking, "Have you?" as though to a contemporary.

"Neither have I, of course," Rosamund assured him rather apologetically, "but I am very much interested in it just at present; I've been reading about Siberia."

"What was the book?"

"Oh, it's only a children's book—and I think it's rather old-fashioned—one about Siberian exiles."

A sudden memory of his boyhood, book-encompassed, stirred eagerly in Ludovic.

"Is it called 'The Young Exiles'?" he cried.

"Oh! have you read it too?"

Their eyes met, and a delighted sense of recognition seemed to dance in both.

"I like the beginning part of it best, when the father is first arrested, and they go to the Czar. Do you remember?"

"Yes. And have you come to the part . . ."

They were as much excited as old friends meeting unexpectedly in a foreign country.

Ludovic remembered the book, which had absorbed him twenty years earlier, a good deal more clearly than he remembered the reviews which were now the objects of his monthly perusal.

They talked about "The Young Exiles" until the house was reached.

## THE PELICANS

Lady Argent greeted them with smiles and kind, outstretched hand, but Ludovic felt convinced by the rather nervous cheeriness of her "Well, children dear, how do you like the garden?" that Mrs. Tregaskis had been impressing upon his mother the necessity for carrying off the situation with a high-handed brightness.

The brightness of Mrs. Tregaskis herself was beyond question.

"We heard you having a great pow-wow as you came along," she said gaily. "What was it all about?"

She looked at Rosamund, but it was Frances who, after an instant's pause, replied gently and gravely:

"It was about a book, mostly."

"Ah! story-books, story-books, story-books!" Mrs. Tregaskis shook her head good-humouredly. "I suspect both these little people of being book-worms."

The laugh in her kindly gaze was inflexible, and Lady Argent responded to it by a faint tinkle of mirth that Ludovic savagely told himself was sycophantic.

"Well, I was a bit of a book-worm myself, once upon a time. No, no, don't ask me how long ago." No one showed any signs of doing so. "It must have been quite a hundred years ago, since I wasn't much bigger than Frances is now, if you can imagine such a thing."

She gave her ready, jolly laugh with both hands on her wide hips.

"I used to sit up in an old pear-tree in the orchard (down till Tintagel 'twas, ma dear), and read everything I could find—not the sort of story-books you children of to-day get hold of, I can assure you, but books that you'd think very stiff and dry, I expect."

She was now addressing herself, almost in narrative form, to Rosamund and Frances, but Ludovic noted with venomous satisfaction that the politely unresponsive expression on both faces seemed to discourage her slightly.

She turned to Lady Argent again, with another slight laugh, as it were of proud apology for her own literary infancy.

"I really believe I'd worked my way through the whole of Motley's 'Dutch Republic' before I was ten years old, and as for Don Quixote, he was my hero. In

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## THE PELICANS

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fact my lightest literature was Spenser's 'Faerie Queen,' most of which I knew by heart."

"My dear! At ten years old! Just think of it!" This from Lady Argent. Ludovic contented himself with the bitter ejaculation:

"Liar!"

Which civil and ingratiating apostrophe was naturally confined to his own breast.

"Don't you find that this generation has a positively vitiated taste as regards fiction?" Bertha Tregaskis demanded of her hostess, who, having all her life been innocently devoid of any taste for fiction at all, replied in an unsure voice:

"Do you mean sort of penny dreadfuls, Bertie, dear? which they always say the housemaids like, though I'm sure mine have the most superior taste, for they read books like 'St. Elmo' or 'Donovan' for choice, I believe. I know my maid told me she was reading a novel called 'Infelice,' whatever that may mean. So educated of her, I thought, to choose a book with a foreign name like that." " 'Infelese'?" repeated Mrs. Tregaskis uncomprehendingly. "Oh, *Infelice*! I know what you mean. My dear Sybil!"

More laughter.

"Have I said something absurd?" Lady Argent helplessly inquired; "I never do know anything about books, you know—so unlike Ludovic."

She looked proudly at her son.

"You know he writes, Bertie?"

Ludovic had writhed under this simple announcement ever since his tenth year.

"But how splendid!" cried Mrs. Tregaskis with enthusiasm. "Who publishes for you?"

Ludovic felt convinced that she expected him to disclaim ever having got as far as publication, and took a vicious satisfaction in replying:

" 'Cameron's Review' has taken one or two small things, but they really are so very few and far between that only a fond parent *could* look upon me as a writer, in any sense of the word."

"Nonsense," murmured his mother. "Don't listen

to him, Bertie. He had a most beautiful thing, pages and pages long, all about Early English Poetry in the 'Age of Literature,' only a few weeks ago."

Mrs. Tregaskis appeared to be as much impressed as the fondest of parents could desire.

"You don't say so! Splendid! Scrumptious!" She almost shouted in her enthusiasm.

"I envy you dilettantes, who have time for all that sort of thing. A poverty-stricken Cornish woman like myself has to write what and when she can, just to turn an honest penny now and then."

"Bertie! you don't mean to say you write, as well as everything else?"

"Oh my dear Sybil, the greatest rubbish, you know—just a story here and there, to bring in a much-needed guinea."

She laughed the gallant laugh of one who would scorn to deny the need of guineas.

"How too wonderful she is," said Lady Argent in an undertone to the universe at large. "Bertie, you must let us read your stories."

"Oh no, my dear. They're only just scribbled off between a Mothers' Meeting and a dairy class—just anyhow. What would the writer say to that?"

She looked roguishly at Ludovic.

"How I envy you! If I had nothing else to do but sit in this magnificent study, I should try and write a book, perhaps; but as it is . . . I envy you."

There was an instant's silence.

An unpardonable instinct to see whether it were possible thoroughly to disconcert his mother's friend seized upon Ludovic.

"I wish to goodness," he said slowly, and with an entirely assumed bitterness of tone, "that I *had* something to do besides sit in a study and scribble—it's not fit for a man."

It was almost the first time that his mother had ever heard him allude to his infirmity, and she flushed from brow to chin.

But Mrs. Tregaskis was more than equal to the situation, as its creator had surmised that she would be.

The jovial lines of her face softened into kindly compassion, and the slow noddings of her head were portentous with understanding:

"Aha!" she murmured eloquently, and the depths of comprehension in her brooding gaze left Ludovic utterly defeated. Then, after a moment's silence, obviously consecrated by Mrs. Tregaskis to her complete and all-embracing understanding of Ludovic Argent, she gravitated skilfully towards a brighter outlook.

"What a joy that little gift of writing is, though! I always say it's like the quality of mercy, twice blessed—it blesses him that gives *and* him that takes——"

"My dear Bertie!" said Lady Argent with her soft laugh, and under a vague impression that Bertie was being epigrammatic and slightly daring with a passage from the Scriptures.

"Well, it's very true," laughed Mrs. Tregaskis. "I'm sure the readers of 'Cameron's' and the 'Age of Literature' often bless your son's contributions, and as to 'him that gives,' I know it really is the greatest joy to me sometimes, when the real work of the day is done, to feel I can let myself sit down for a few minutes and turn out half a dozen little French couplets or some fanciful piece of nonsense about children and fairies—you know the sort of thing. It does seem to rest one so."

"To rest one!" echoed Lady Argent, with at least three notes of admiration in her voice.

"Children, do you realize what a wonderful person your—your guardian is! She'll tell you all sorts of stories about fairies and things. I know you're perfectly marvellous with children, Bertie," she added in a most audible aside.

"Little people generally like my long yarns about the Cornish pixies," admitted Mrs. Tregaskis. "Have you ever seen a pixie, Frances?"

"No," said Frances coldly.

"Ah, they don't grow in this part of the world. But there are wonderful things in Cornwall, as you'll find out when you live there."

"When do you go?" asked Ludovic of Rosamund.

Her sensitive face flushed.



"To-morrow, I think," she half whispered, with a glance in the direction of Mrs. Tregaskis, that seemed to Ludovic to convey hostility and a half defiant fear.

"Well, Sybil," Bertha observed, "am I to see the garden, too?"

"Oh yes, of course. I'm longing for your advice—you know so much about a garden, and those things you made me get for the rookery last year aren't doing quite as well as I hoped. Do come and tell me what you think of them."

Mrs. Tregaskis rose. Her eye rested for a moment on the children. Then she said briskly:

"The children must show us the way. I expect they've ferreted out every corner in the place, during that grand exploration before tea, if they haven't actually danced upon your most cherished rock-plants. I know what country kids are like."

Ludovic thought of the two little forlorn figures that he had found under the great ilex-tree, and Mrs. Tregaskis' joviality seemed to him singularly out of place.

He rose and opened the door.

"Form fours—quick march—left, right, left, right," cried Bertie playfully, giving Rosamund a gentle push by the shoulders.

Rosamund and Frances went out.

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Mrs. TREGASKIS shut the door behind them with astonishing briskness and whisked round to face her hostess.

"A little diplomatic ruse, my dear, to get those infants out of hearing. And once out of doors they'll be tearing all over the place and forget our very existence. I really must talk to you about them—that eldest girl means trouble if I know anything of spoiled children. I foresee a scene this evening."

"Why, Bertie dear! I thought them so very brave and good, poor little things."

"Oh, you know what children are! They've practically 'got over' it as people say, already, but there's bound to be an outburst, I'm afraid, at the 'last evening'—you know the kind of thing. The men have been taking away the furniture, such of it as is going to be sold, this afternoon while we've been out, and I do rather dread taking them back to that half-dismantled cottage. Rosemund is very highly strung, poor child, and she always infects the little one."

"Poor children," sighed Lady Argent, while Ludovic was wishing that Mrs. Tregaskis had not taken up a position that rendered it impossible for him to walk out at the door.

"Poor me, too, I think. It's very stupid to mind it, but these days have been a frightful strain, in a way—one has somehow felt for them so much more than they've probably felt for themselves. But what with mothering them, and seeing to the business part of it all, and packing up, I really feel a rag."

She sank limply into an armchair and Ludovic made for the unguarded doorway as rapidly as he could.

"My poor dear! But why shouldn't you all stay here for the night, and avoid going back to the cottage at all. Do do that, Bertie dear."

"Sybil, you angel!" cried Mrs. Tregaskis, reviving abruptly. "What a lot it would save me—I've simply been dreading to-night. But wouldn't it be a fearful nuisance?"

Ludovic opened the door, stumbled on the threshold, then awkwardly readjusted his crutch and shut the library door with a hasty bang.

He had almost fallen over Rosamund Grantham, crouching outside the door.

She raised a deeply flushed face, and he looked gravely down at her. He was shocked only at the unchildlike misery and exhaustion that showed in her dark-circled eyes.

"Let me help you up from the floor," he said after a moment, as though her position were the most usual one for a guest to select.

She let him take her hand and raise her from the floor, and then followed him slowly across the hall into a small morning-room.

Ludovic supposed that he ought to say: "Listening at doors is dishonourable," but the sense of courtesy, apparently less in abeyance than where Bertha Tregaskis was concerned, revolted, and he moreover felt convinced that Rosamund was as well aware as himself of the breach she had committed.

Presently she said in a low voice:

"I know it is dreadful to listen at doors. I have never done it before, but I felt certain—*certain*—that they would try and arrange something or other without telling me—perhaps separate me and Francie or something; there's nobody to understand anything, and I don't know what is going to happen to us."

"They can't separate you and your sister," said Ludovic earnestly; "no one could do that."

"Then what are they settling in there, all by themselves? I know they're talking about us, because I could hear a little—but only a very little—that was the worst of it."

She began to struggle with tears.

"My mother asked Mrs. Tregaskis to stay here with you and your sister, for to-night, instead of going back," he told her straight.

"Why weren't Frances and I asked if we would? Why is it arranged like that without telling me?" she demanded resentfully, her voice shaking.

"I don't know. I suppose Mrs. Tregaskis thought you would not mind. Do you mind very much? If you do, I—I will see that you *do* go home to-night," said Ludovic desperately.

She looked at him for an instant with a sort of wonder in her eyes that touched him acutely, and then broke into floods of tears.

Ludovic stood looking out of the window.

"She is utterly bewildered by that woman," he told himself angrily, "and distrusts her instinctively. Heaven help the child! What will she do in Cornwall? That woman will break her. Dear, kind, wonderful Bertie, as my mother calls her! and those two—sensitive, highly-strung, who've probably lived in an atmosphere of under-

He wondered for a wild instant if his mother could be persuaded to receive Rosamund and Frances as daughters. It hardly seemed probable, in view alone of her admiration for their self-appointed guardian. How could the charges of the benevolent cousin be reft from her under no pretext but their reluctance to be benefited, and Ludovic Argent's passionate conviction that such beneficence would be the ruin of both?

"I'm not crying any more," said Rosamund's voice behind him, after a few moments.

He turned round.

"What shall I do? Shall I tell my mother that you are to go to your home again this evening?"

She shook her head.

"No, thank you. In a way, they're quite right. Frances would only cry, which would be bad for her."

"Where is she now?" asked Ludovic.

"In the garden. She doesn't know," said Rosamund, colouring again, "about my listening at the door. She would think it dreadful, and I know it is—but somehow nothing seemed to matter except just to know what was going to be done with us."

She looked mournfully at him and he saw her, be-

## THE PELICANS

wildered and defenceless, thrust among alien standards and with all the foundations of her tiny world rocking. No wonder that in a suddenly revolutionized scale of values honour had seemed to count for less than the primitive instinct of self-defence.

"What *can* I do for you?" he said, almost unconsciously venting aloud the strong sense of impotent compassion that moved him.

"Oh" she cried, "nobody can make things come right again—even God couldn't, though I've prayed and prayed."

"Do you mean—your mother?"

"My mother *had* to die," she told him seriously.

"She coughed and coughed every night, sometimes right on till the next morning. The night that she died, it was dreadful. She never stopped. I prayed for anything that might stop her coughing like that, and God answered the prayer by making her die. When I heard she wasn't coughing any more, I thought it was all my prayers being answered, and I went to sleep, and then in the morning *she* came and told us that mother had died."

She stopped and looked at him, with the most pathetic look that can be seen on a child's face, that of bewilderment at pain.

"Go on," said Ludovic in a low voice.

"Cousin Bertie said we could go in and see her afterwards, but I wouldn't"—she shuddered—"I thought it would frighten Francie so. And we didn't go to the funeral, either. Were you there?" she asked suddenly.

"No. I only came back from Paris yesterday," he told her gently.

"Cousin Bertie went. She was very kind, and made us go in the garden, and told us a lot of things about heaven, and mother being quite well again now and happy, and somehow it didn't all seem so bad then. But now we're going away, and—and there's nobody to understand. Except you," she added mournfully.

"Haven't you any relations at all?"

"No. Only Cousin Bertie. She is very kind, and she is taking us to live with her—but oh, she doesn't understand!"

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The despair in Rosamund's voice seemed to Ludovic Argent to sum up all the inadequacy that he had felt in Bertha Tregaskis. She was very kind—she was taking the orphans to live with her—but she would never understand."

He felt her lack of understanding to be yet more apparent when Mrs. Tregaskis called Rosamund and Frances back to the library, just as Frances timidly pushed open the French window of the room where he stood with Rosamund.

An imploring look from Rosamund made him follow them quickly into the library.

Lady Argent welcomed him with a glad look in which, nevertheless, he detected a slight surprise.

"Well, you two," began Bertha in a tone of careful gaiety, "what do you think of an invitation? Kind Lady Argent wants us all three to stay here for the night. Then cook won't have any trouble about getting supper ready for us, and we shan't have to bother any more about squeezing into the bedrooms with all those trunks! Isn't that splendid?"

"We shall have to go back to get our things," said Frances quickly and solemnly.

"I'll see to all that," declared kind Mrs. Tregaskis briskly. "I'm going to pop over and see to one or two things, and I'll bring back the nighties with me. I shall put on my seven-leagued boots, and be back before you know I've gone."

"I'll go back with you," said Rosamund.

"No, my dear. It's too far for you." There was an underlying anxiety in Mrs. Tregaskis' firm kindness.

Frances looked at her sister with consternation.

"But—but——" she half-whispered, turning her back on Mrs. Tregaskis, "it's our very last night at home. We *must* go back, Rosamund."

"Bon! ça y est," ejaculated Bertie under her breath and casting a glance of humorous despair at Lady Argent and Ludovic. "Une scène de première classe!"

He noted with angry resentment her admirable French.

"Rosamund and Frances," she said, in a tone of elaborate reasonableness, "I want you to listen to me,

like good children. Lady Argent is very kindly letting you stay here so that we shouldn't have to go back to the cottage, which is all upside down with packing and— and furniture and things, and I want you to be very good and give no trouble at all."

"Oh no," breathed Lady Argent, distressed. "But would they rather—do they want to go to the cottage again——" She hesitated helplessly.

"Bless me," cried Bertie cheerily, "the cottage isn't going to run away in the night. There'll be heaps of time to-morrow morning before we start for home."

Rosamund flushed an angry red.

"The cottage is *our* home," she said with emphasis.

"Well, darling, that's very loyal of you," laughed her guardian, "and I'm quite ready to hear you call it so until you've got used to our part of the world."

"Now what about washing paws, Sybil, before we adorn your dinner-table?"

It was perhaps this masterly conduct of a difficult situation that made Lady Argent say to her son that evening, when Mrs. Tregaskis had hurried upstairs "just to give those two a tucking-up and 'God bless you'":

"Oh Ludovic! How splendid Bertie is, and how I hope it will turn out well."

"Why should it not?" asked Ludovic, who held, indeed, his own certainties as to why it should not, but was perversely desirous of hearing and contradicting his mother's point of view.

"It's always rather a risk, isn't it, to take other people's children like that, even though they are relations. But they're dear little girls, and so good and brave."

"They seem to me singularly intelligent, and altogether rather remarkable."

"Yes, indeed, one does feel that," returned Lady Argent with the sort of gentle cordiality with which she almost always acclaimed any opportunity of praising others, and which consequently detracted considerably from the value of her approbation. "They are not at all ordinary, I feel sure, and that's why it seems so very fortunate that Bertie, of all people, should take them. She will *understand* them so wonderfully. Her love of children is one of the most characteristic things about

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her, and she always says herself that she's never quite stopped being a child in some ways, and so understands children. They come to her instinctively. Children and animals always *know*, they say."

Ludovic had met this aphorism before, and disagreed with it profoundly, but he had no wish to deprive his mother of any of the gentle Victorian beliefs which ruled her life. At thirty years old, Ludovic Argent was still young enough to feel superior.

But at this moment his thoughts were altogether engaged with the little girls who yesterday had been all but unknown to him. Presently, to his own surprise, he said:

"Mother, you wouldn't consider the idea of having those two here, I suppose?"

"You don't mean for good, Ludovic?"

He did, but a certain strain of moral cowardice, always latent in the imaginative, made him temporize.

"Well—for a long visit, perhaps. I—I think they'd be happier near their old home, and in their own part of the world."

"But, my dear boy," said his astonished mother, "you surely don't mean to suggest that I should adopt two children of whom I know hardly anything, when they've already been offered an excellent and much more suitable home with a relation? It would be quite impossible. Do think of what you're saying."

Ludovic thought. From every point of view his suggestion was inadmissible. The instinct which had prompted it, he decided, was unpractical sentimentality. He rose abruptly.

"You're right, of course. It would be quite impossible."

Lady Argent's sigh was compounded of mingled relief and regret that any scheme suggested by her son would prove to be impracticable.

"Perhaps," she said, by way of compromise, "we could have them to stay, later on. I quite see what you mean about their liking the Wye valley, poor little things. And of course I know how fond you are of children, darling."

Ludovic rightly conjectured that the last few hours had for ever placed this parental illusion beyond the reach of doubt. It would be part of the penalty of an unconventional, and therefore unpractical, suggestion.

"The infants are asleep!" cried Bertha Tregaskis at the door, merrily, triumphantly, and also, as it happened, altogether untruly. "At least if they're not they ought to be. I left them very much *en route* for the Land of Nod, though Rosamund wouldn't own to it, and of course the little one always holds fast by her. I tell you what, Sybil, it will be the making of them both to be with another child. As it is, I can see that Rosamund is domineering, and Frances simply has no individuality of her own. It always is so when there are only two. The elder or cleverer or stronger simply has things all her own way—and Rosamund is all three. She has any amount of character, but I foresee a handful. Well, it's all in the day's work, I suppose."

"As though your day wasn't full enough already, Bertie dear!"

Ludovic left the room.

Next morning the visitors were driven early to the station. There was, after all, Mrs. Tegaskis had declared at breakfast, no time to return to the cottage on the other side of the valley—Rosamund and Frances must wave to it from the train window. Couldn't they see the garden and a little bit of the house from the train? Very well, then it would be quite exciting to watch for it. They could have a race to see who caught sight of it first.

Into this bracing atmosphere of cheery optimism Ludovic's voice cut coldly and decisively:

"I can drive round that way, if you wish it." He addressed himself directly to Rosamund. His mother looked surprised, but it was left to Bertha to exclaim:

"Only at the risk of missing the train, and I don't want to do that—my old man is counting on my being back by the early train, and he'll drive down to meet it, I expect. That's no joke, when one lives three miles from the station at the top of one of our Cornish hills!"

Mrs. Tregaskis was always possessive when speaking of Cornwall.

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"I'm afraid you might find it rather out of your way, Ludovic, and we haven't left much time," began Lady Argent apologetically.

"I don't mind," said Rosamund miserably, answering Ludovic's gaze.

"Good girl!" said Mrs. Tregaskis approvingly. "Why, Francie!"

Frances had suddenly begun to cry, quietly and hopelessly.

Rosamund said "*Francie!*" in a tone of exasperated misery that spoke of nerves rasped to breaking point.

"Hush! Leave her to me," commanded her guardian.

"Frances, darling, what is it? Come here to me. What is the matter?"

She held out both her capable hands.

Frances looked at her quite silently with streaming eyes.

"Oh," cried Lady Argent pitifully, and Frances turned to her at once and hid her face against the outstretched arm.

"Poor little thing," said Lady Argent almost tearfully. But Ludovic noted that his mother seemed to comfort Frances in an instinctive sort of way, with gentle hand stroking her hair, and without attempting to make her speak.

Bertha Tregaskis, "wonderful with children," Ludovic ironically reflected, was capable of nothing more startling than an imperative:

"Hush, now, Rosamund. She'll stop in a minute. Go on with your breakfast, and remember that you have a long journey in front of you. However, you'll have a real Cornish tea when you arrive—splits and cream, and pasties, and all sorts of things. Us has a real proper ole set-tü, at tay-time." She laughed, and for the rest of the meal was very jovial and talkative, drawing attention from Frances, who presently stopped crying and wiped her eyes in a shamefaced way. She looked timidly once or twice at Rosamund, which glances were intercepted by Mrs. Tregaskis with significantly raised eyebrows which said plainly to Lady Argent, "What did I tell you?"

But it was Ludovic who saw the elder sister's answering look and read into it her intense agony of protective love and impotent apprehension. The dead mother might have made Frances' world, but Frances made Rosamund's.

### III

"HERE we are!" declared Mrs. Tregaskis thankfully, as the train slowed down at Porthlew. "I declare it's good to be alive, in such weather and a country like this one."

She descended lightly on to the astonishingly bleak little platform, empty and swept by a north wind.

"Now for bags and baggage! Frances—umbrellas, dressing-bag, papers—that's all right. Rosamund? Come along, darlings, you must get out everything while I see to the luggage. Porter! Ah, Trewin, good-afternoon. Is the trap outside? Just show these young ladies the way, and then come back for the trunks. How's the wife?"

"Better, thank you, Mrs. Tregaskis," said the man, touching his cap with a grin.

"That's right. Tell her I'll be round to see her in a day or two."

Kind, competent Mrs. Tregaskis hurried along, beaming and exchanging greetings with one or two porters and a newspaper-boy.

"How pleased they all are to see her," said Frances wistfully. "Isn't it cold, Rosamund?"

"It's much colder than at home. Turn up your collar, Francie. Do you think we shall go to the house in a cab?"

"No—she said the old man would drive down in a trap. I suppose it's the coachman."

"I think she meant Cousin Frederick. She said 'my old man.'"

"Oh! Is he very old?" asked Frances in rather awe-struck tones.

"I suppose he must be."

But when they presently went outside the station and climbed into the tall dog-cart, driven by Cousin Frederick, they did not think him very old after all.

He was small and brown and clean-shaven, with a thin, deeply lined face and a curious twist at the corner of his mouth that gave him the appearance of always wearing a rather sardonic smile. But his little grey eyes were inscrutable, and never smiled. No one had ever called him Freddy, or even Fred.

He lifted his cap to Rosamund and Frances and said:

"I'm afraid I can't get down. The mare won't stand. Do you mind sitting at the back?"

They climbed up obediently, and from an elevation which both secretly felt to be perilous, watched the arrival of Mrs. Tregaskis and sundry minor articles of luggage.

"Here we are," she announced gaily to her husband, after the universal but obvious fashion of the newly arrived. "How are you, dear? and how's Hazel? All well at home? That's right, thank you, Trewin. You'll see to the boxes, won't you. I suppose the luggage cart is here?"

Frederick pointed silently with the whip.

"Oh yes, that's all right. Well, I'll pop in, and we can be off."

She patted the mare vehemently.

"Jenny needs clipping," she observed in parenthesis. "Well"—she got in beside her husband.

As they drove through the steep town of Porthlew Mrs. Tregaskis exchanged cheery salutations in her hearty, ringing voice with a number of people. Frederick slanted the whip slightly in the direction of his cap, straightened it again, and said nothing.

Neither did he say anything throughout the three-mile drive, nor when they stopped before the square stone house, and Mrs. Tregaskis kissed first Rosamund and then Frances, on the steps of the porch, and said:

"Welcome home, darlings."

Then she shouted aloud:

"Hazel, my poppet! Hazel! Come and say how d'ye do to the cousins."

Hazel Tregaskis, aged fourteen, came into the hall. She was small and brown like her father, with something of the same twist at the corner of her mouth, but rendered

charming by rippling tawny hair, and beautiful eyes where an elfin spirit of mockery seemed eternally to dance. She held herself very erect, and moved with remarkable grace and lightness.

They had tea in the hall, and Hazel sat beside her father and chattered freely to the new arrivals.

"Where is Minnie?" suddenly demanded Mrs. Tregaskis. "Frederick, we've forgotten Minnie. Where is Minnie? Hazel, where is Minnie—where is Miss Blandflower, darling?"

"I don't know," said Hazel calmly.

"Go and find her at once, my pet. Poor Miss Blandflower! You know this isn't quite like her own home, and we never want to let her feel herself forgotten, or unwanted. Now run, Hazel."

Hazel rose from her place with no appearance of haste, and went slowly in search of the missing one.

Mrs. Tregaskis remarked rather elaborately:

"Miss Blandflower is a very old friend of ours, though she is a great deal younger than I am. She will give you your lessons, I hope, with Hazel."

"Is she Hazel's governess?" inquired Frances gently.

Frederick Tregaskis nodded, but his wife said with an air of slight repression: "She lives with us, Frances dear, as I told you, and we do our very best to make her feel that this is her home. You see, Miss Blandflower is extremely poor, and has nowhere else to live."

"Like us," returned Frances with mournful matter-of-factness.

"Not at all like you," said her cousin Frederick, suddenly looking at her. "Neither you nor Rosamund need think that you have nowhere to go. You will have money of your father's some day, in fact it belongs to you now, and will be used for your education and any other expenses. You can go to school, if you would like that, or live with anybody——"

"Come, come, Frederick, we needn't go into these sordid details," said Bertha, with an extremely annoyed laugh.

Frances looked bewildered, as though she felt herself to have received a rebuke, but Rosamund's grey eyes

met those of Frederick Tregaskis with a sudden lightening of their sombre gloom.

"I disagree with you, Bertha," he observed, with a look of dislike at his wife. "These things are much better clearly defined. It is quite conceivable that Rosamund and Frances may dislike the position of refugees under our hospitable roof, and in that case they may as well know that I shall further any reasonable scheme they may entertain for existence elsewhere."

"Frederick, how impossible you are, dear. The children will think you don't want them. Cousin Frederick is only joking, darling," she added, laying her hand on Frances' reassuringly.

"I never joke," said Cousin Frederick with an acid expression that did much to confirm his statement. "Another cup of tea, if you please."

"Here is Minnie," cried Mrs. Tregaskis in tones of relief not wholly attributable to the appearance of Miss Blandflower.

"Here I am, last but not least," agitatedly murmured the late-comer, while her hostess cordially embraced her, and presented Rosamund and Frances.

Miss Blandflower belonged to that numerous and mistaken class of person which supposes the art of witty conversation to lie in the frequent quotation of well-known tags and the humorously-intended mispronunciation of the more ordinary words in the English language.

She said, "Not lost, but gone before," with a slightly nervous laugh, when Bertha deplored her lateness for tea, and explained that this was due to a mistaken impression that tea was to be at five o'clock. However, live and learn. And it was almost mechanically that she murmured, on being invited to eat saffron cake: "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more, well, perhaps I will——"

"Minnie," said Mrs. Tregaskis, shaking a playfully admonishing finger at her, "how, now *how*, is the dairy? Have you been in once since I've been away?"

"Dear Mrs. Tregaskis, how can you? Of course I have. I've tried to see to everything, though of course no one could take your place. I needn't tell you that."



## THE PELICANS

"Rubbish, my dear, rubbish. How's the new dairy-maid? I was very vexed at having to leave without settling her, I must confess. Will she do?"

"I doubt it, said the carpenter," returned Minnie, shaking her head.

Her voice never gave any hint of inverted commas, and Frances looked at her with large, surprised eyes.

Miss Blandflower was thin and sandy, with eyeglasses, and might have been of any age between thirty-four and forty. She several times glanced affectionately at Mrs. Tregaakis, and said, "A sight for sore eyes, as they say," and then flung a nervous look at Frederick, who remained silent.

After tea Rosamund and Frances were shown the garden, where Cousin Bertha had turned a piece of rough ground into a tennis court, and made a herbaceous border and two rockeries, and the stables, where Cousin Bertha proposed personally to conduct the clipping of the mare Jenny, on the morrow, and where she slapped Jenny's hind-quarters with a heartiness that violently disconcerted both children, unused to animals of any description.

They were also taken over the little dairy, where Cousin Bertha superintended the making of cheese and butter and cream which, she assured them, to their utter bewilderment, "paid," and where she also weekly instructed a class of girls from the neighbouring farms. They were shown the chickens, bred and kept and fed, and, Frances supposed in her utter ignorance of the expert language employed by her cousin, doubtless hatched by Cousin Bertha, and the little orchard where Cousin Bertha had planted a variety of small apple-trees, most of which she indicated by name.

Hazel came with them, and gazed compassionately at the obviously bewildered pair.

"Haven't you got a dairy and chickens and a horse at your home?" she asked Rosamund, who replied darkly:

"No. We don't understand about those sort of things. We had books and a garden, and two cats with kittens, at home."

"Well, *this* home will give you something new!" declared her guardian with undiminished brightness,

although Rosamund's tone had been far indeed from expressing enthusiasm for "those sort of things."

"We had a most beautiful piano," said Frances to Hazel. "It was so good that it was called the Grand Piano, and nobody ever touched it except——"

She stopped and coloured.

Hazel nodded her head quickly.

"Except your mummy, I expect," she said calmly, and gave Frances' hand a little squeeze.

Rosamund heard and saw her, and from thence onward she liked Haze' Tregaskis.

Cousin Bertha said:

"Well, we've got a piano here, and you shall hear it presently. I expect you're fond of music, aren't you?"

There was a silence before Frances timidly replied "Yes," as in duty bound. She liked tunes very much herself, and she knew that Rosamund never would talk about music, and that mother had said she had no ear. But Cousin Bertha evidently expected "yes" for an answer, and Frances unconsciously felt that Cousin Bertha was one of those persons who would always receive just exactly that answer which they expect to receive.

When it grew dark they went indoors, and into the drawing-room. There was some furniture, which Cousin Bertha, who knew a great deal about furniture, said was old and very good, and an upright piano.

"Would you like me to play to you?" said Cousin Bertha. "Hazel always comes to the drawing-room for an hour before she has her supper, and we enjoy ourselves. There'll be lots more games we can play now you two have come. But I dare say you'd rather just have a little music, to-night."

Rosamund, the unmusical, shook her head dumbly and almost imperceptibly. But Frances, still with that hypnotic sense of having to reply whatever Cousin Bertha expected her to reply, said: "Yes, if you please."

So Mrs. Tregaskis sat down at the piano and played without any music in front of her, some very gay and spirited tunes, and sometimes she sang in a strong, ringing voice, and called to Hazel to join in the chorus.

## THE PELICANS

Rosamund and Frances sat in the shadow and held one another's hands.

Presently Hazel joined them and said very low indeed: "Do you like it?"

"It is very kind of Cousin Bertha," gravely returned Rosamund.

"I don't much like it when mother plays. I would rather play myself," said Hazel. "There's a person at Porthlew called Mrs. Severing who plays beautifully. She has published a lot of music—songs and things."

"Shall we ever see her?" asked Frances.

"Oh yes, she often comes here. She is mother's greatest friend. We'll make her play really nice things."

"Don't you like Cousin Bertha's things that she plays? I do," said Frances, rather shocked.

"Rosamund doesn't," shrewdly returned Hazel. But Rosamund remained silent, partly from courtesy, and partly because she knew that she would not be able to keep the tumult of misery that was choking her out of her voice.

The memory of Wye Valley days, already remote, was gripping her unendurably. Her emotions, infinitely stronger than her undeveloped personality, were always strung to breaking pitch at the appeal made to them by music. For although it was true that she had very little ear, and that her fingers were devoid of all skill, the Slavonic tradition and the Slavonic passion were in her blood, and to such as these, music is a doorway better left secure.

When Mrs. Tregaskis had reiterated several times in rousing tones that here was a health unto His Majesty, with a Fal-lal-lal-lal lah la, Hazel said:

"Please, will you play the one I like out of that book?"

"I thought you liked them all," her parent replied, not without a hint of amused resentment. "Which do you mean?"

"King Charles."

"Oh! 'Farewell Manchester.' Very well, darling, and then you must pop off upstairs."

The song she played was much slower and quieter than the others, and she did not sing it. Neither Rosamund

nor Frances had ever heard it before, but the infinite sadness of the simple melody made its instant appeal to a sensitiveness which was singularly developed in both.

Frances cried a little quite silently with her face pressed against her sister's arm, and Rosamund clenched her hands together and set her teeth.

When Mrs. Tregaskis closed the piano and came towards them, Rosamund said: "Thank you very much, Cousin Bertha."

It seemed to her that she had been saying just that, again and again, for days.

"Call me 'Cousin Bertie,' darling. I declare I shall fine the next person who says that dreadful 'Cousin Bertha.' Such a prim, horrid name, I always think. Besides, I only know myself as Bertie. Do you know the people down here still call me Miss Bertie. Don't they, Hazel?"

Rosamund did know. She had heard Mrs. Tregaskis say so already.

She went drearily up to the schoolroom supper, where Miss Blandflower was waiting for them.

"I hope you've brought good appetites with you from Wales," she said, taking her place at the head of the table. "I see I must *wrastle* with this large ham-bone."

She did so, in the ineffectual manner that was characteristic of her.

"Shall I cut the bread, Miss Blandflower?" asked Hazel.

"Please, dear, if you will do," replied her teacher of English.

The meal was a silent one.

Little Frances was fighting bravely with tears and fatigue, and Rosamund's thoughts were in the Wye Valley, where lights were beginning to tremble in the cottage windows, and only the little house on the slope of the hill would remain dark and silent. Hazel looked at them from time to time with a sort of compassion in her great laughing eyes, but was more engaged in a kind of silent drama conducted between her knife and her silver mug, with which she nightly diversified the monotony of meals eaten in Miss Blandflower's company.

When presently she upset the mug half-full of milk, Minnie rose, rebuked her pupil querulously, murmured something which sounded like "Well, Allah gear cum allah gear, as they say," applied her table-napkin to the widening pool, and the meal came to an end.

Interminable though the day had seemed, it was finished at last, and Rosamund and Frances lying in the pretty bedroom which they were to share.

"I think Hazel is going to be nice," whispered Frances wistfully.

"Yes, so do I. But I wish we had stayed with Lady Argent and the son who was lame."

"Oh! so do I!"

"Nearly asleep, my darlings?" inquired Cousin Bertha at the door. "I've just run up to say good-night. I always tuck Hazel up, and now I must do the same to my two new little daughters."

"Rosamund," said Frances in a guilty whisper, when Mrs. Tregaskis had rustled softly away again, "perhaps we oughtn't to have wished that, about having stayed with Lady Argent. Cousin Bertie is very, very kind, isn't she?"

If an unconscious appeal for reassurance underlay the question, neither Frances nor Rosamund was aware of it.

"Yes," answered Rosamund, with shamed conviction; "she is very, very kind."

Kind Mrs. Tregaskis was already hastening downstairs again. In the lamp-lit library her husband was reading the newspaper. He did not stir as she came in to the room, nor raise his eyes.

"Well!" sighed Bertha, as she moved to her writing-table, stacked with papers in orderly pigeon-holes and bearing a goodly pile of unopened letters. "How dreadfully work accumulates, even during a week. Here are all those leaflets for the Mothers' Union that ought to have gone out last week. Minnie really is a fool. And she forwarded all the wrong letters to me, too, and none of the right ones. I must answer half these to-night."

She sat down, and drew paper and ink towards her.

At the first sound which indicated that her pen was

fairly started, Frederick put down his newspaper and spoke.

"Well Bertha, as you have had your way in the matter of bringing these children home with you, I suppose we had better come to an understanding on the subject."

He invariably called his wife Bertha.

"No, dear, not to-night," said Mrs. Tregaskis with pseudo-firmness. "I have to deal with all these letters."

Frederick, who knew his wife, remained silent.

In a moment she resumed with spirit:

"Besides, what is there to discuss? I wrote to you when poor Rose Grantham died and said that I wanted to take her children, and give them a home. The alternative was either a cheap school, or the raking up of some third-rate foreign relation who might have been paid to look after them. I told you that it seemed to be—how shall I put it?—plus fort que moi—the impulse simply to take and—and love them."

"I do not like impulses," said Frederick coldly, "but you do not often—I might almost say ever—act on impulse, Bertha."

She laughed angrily. "I'm very glad to hear you say so, since I'm always trying to learn caution, but as a matter of fact you are utterly mistaken, as you very often are where I am concerned. I've been exceedingly impetuous all my life, and I haven't outgrown it yet. Of course I know very well that only an impetuous woman would have suggested adopting two children like that—but, upon my word, I'd rather trust to my love of children and take my risks."

She drew up her fine figure as she spoke.

"Your risks, in this case, may safely be reckoned as non-existent. On your own showing, Dick Grantham's money will bring in about three hundred a year to each of his children until it passes into their own control. To feed and clothe them meanwhile will cost perhaps a hundred a year each, and leave a handsome margin for educational and other expenses. There is no question of risk."

"My dear man, I've been into the business part of it from end to end and understand it perfectly—a great deal

better than you do, in all probability. That's not the point. There are other risks than monetary ones. Good Heavens! if *that* was all one thought of!"

"Do you mean risks to the children themselves?"

"You know very well that I don't. Little sheltered happy things, what risks do they run, I should like to know? But the responsibility is a big one for me—two more to love and guard and teach, and turn into honest, healthy, happy young women."

"The constant society of Miss Blandflower is hardly likely to do that."

"Poor Minnie! Why do you hate her?"

"I don't. But she is neither honest nor healthy nor happy, and I therefore fail to see why you should expect her to make her pupils so."

"She is perfectly honest, Frederick. If she isn't healthy, it's because she won't take enough exercise, and that whining voice doesn't mean that she isn't happy. It's only affectation."

"If she's affected she isn't honest," remarked Frederick, scoring a point. "However, leave Miss Blandflower out of it. I'm talking of the Grantham children. Why don't you send them to school?"

"Because," said Bertha, her eyes blazing, "they are two motherless children, and no woman with a heart worth the name would have them anywhere but under her own wing. My heart is big enough to take in three children, thank God—yes, and as many more as may need me."

Quoth Frederick, utterly unmoved:

"They would be happier at school."

"They would be miserable there. Two spoilt, uneducated, delicate children. They'd be hopelessly out of their element."

"Not so much so as they will be here."

Bertha Tregaskis, her face suffused with agitation, began to pace up and down the room.

"Of course, if you won't keep them, you won't. But I don't pretend to see your point of view."

"You oughtn't to have the responsibility."

"If you're thinking of all I have to do," she returned

in softened tones, "I'll manage somehow. It's better to wear out than to rust out, and it's little enough one can do. But as long as there's life in me, my motto will always be the old one: 'Lend a hand.'"

"That is precisely where I anticipate danger."

"What danger?" she demanded sharply.

"Danger to Rosamund and Frances Grantham," said Frederick acidly, turning out his reading lamp.

Bertha Tregaskis remained long in the library after he had gone upstairs. She knew that her husband's opposition would find no further expression in words, and that her authority with the children would remain undisputed.

With a sigh she turned to the papers on her desk, and wrote steadily for nearly two hours, directing, encouraging, organizing, and again advising. Finally she spent some fifteen minutes on a letter to Lady Argent, of which the final page may be quoted:

"So you see, Sybil, my dear, it's not going to be quite all plain sailing. But then one never expected that, and the privilege of *giving* is so great that one doesn't count the cost. After all, in all this sad old earth, the one and only thing that counts is Love, and the realest, most sacred form of it, when all's said and done, is that of a mother for her children. Most of us find that out too late, but I don't mean my bairns to if I can help it!

"Good-night, my dear, it's close on twelve and I'm dead to the world. Just one look at my *three*, and then to bed."



#### IV

"WELL, Nina, you see I've trebled my responsibilities," observed Mrs. Tregaskis to her greatest friend.

The greatest friend leant back in her chair and looked exquisitely sympathetic.

"I *know*," she murmured, in tones which prevented the words from sounding too blatantly non-committal.

"You may say that I had my hands fairly full already, one way and another," said Bertha, who was frequently obliged to resort to this oblique method of dragging to light Nina Severing's opinion, in order to set it right.

"But one simply couldn't help it. Those poor little things orphaned, and with no alternative but a cheap school. I must own I acted on impulse—which I'm rather apt to do, I'm afraid, though I deplore the tendency—but somehow one hasn't quite outgrown one's youthful impetuosity——"

"Oh," said Nina Severing with widely open child-like eyes; "but indeed I *quite* think you've left all that behind, Bertie dear. I always envy your wonderful clear-headed prudence and far-seeing ways. I'm sure you're quite the last person to be carried away by an impulse—~~so~~ unlike my silly self, as I always say! But then I was left to be my own guide and mistress so very young—a child. Looking back, I could sometimes almost cry at the thought of that pitiful little figure—a child of twenty, with nothing left but another child to take care of, a memory—and—a star."

Bertha knew of old her friend's passion for analogy, more poetical than exact, and had no intention of inquiring into the antecedents of the star. Besides, she was well aware that Nina Severing was a musician, and had no difficulty in connecting the astral body in question with the composition of several extremely popular drawing-room songs.

She said: "I simply took those two and told them——"

"Not a seventh sound, but a star," Nina quoted penetratingly, immovably determined that her allusion should be made perfectly clear.

Bertie, seeing that the star was not to be ignored, disposed of it by a hurried but sufficiently intense-sounding "Ah—one knows what music means——" She might have added "to you," but for Nina's gentle movement of acquiescence, unmistakably claiming and sheltering all music as her own.

"Well, darling, I simply wrote straight to Frederick and asked if we *could* do anything else than take those two little solitary things home. Of course it isn't an actual expense, because that wouldn't be fair to one's own belongings—they've got quite enough to make it possible. But the other things are what matter, after all."

"Alas! who knows that better than I do?" sighed Nina, a widow, and a rich woman.

Mrs. Tregaskis, a poor one, instantly observed, "Not that it doesn't imply a good many actual material little sacrifices, which perhaps may pinch here and there—but who would think twice about that? When people tell me that I'm an improvident woman, I never can help thinking of the dear old French saying: "*Chaque enfant apporte son pain sous le bras.*"

To which Nina, who spoke no French, promptly retorted with much presence of mind:

"*Dicunt. Quod dicunt? Dicant!* That has been my answer for years to people who can't mind their own business."

The classical nature of this *riposte* left her so content that she was able to ask with affectionate interest:

"And do tell me how it all works? Of course they appeal to me, if only as the children of an intensely musical mother. I heard her play once, I remember—oh, ages ago—when I was in London. Rather a striking-looking woman, and the eldest girl reminded me of her at once. It somehow gave me a little pang—it seemed to bring back that concert, years ago when Geoffrey and I were together."

Bertha was too familiar with the singular power that the most unlikely incidents possessed of recalling Nina's happier hours to accord more than a passing acknowledgement towards this tender tribute to the past.

"My poor dear," she murmured rapidly. "Rosamund is like her mother, but she reminds me of poor Dick Grantham too. My cousin, you know; we were almost brought up together."

Her sigh was perhaps intended to remind Nina that she held no monopoly of lost relatives. "They seem dear children, and very easy to understand, though really I always think that to understand children is a sort of God-given knack, which one is simply lucky enough to possess."

"One" does not sound particularly egotistical, and conveys "I" quite successfully to a practised listener.

"They're very backward about lessons, poor little things; and just imagine! neither of them has ever held a needle or been taught to keep accounts! Why, at ten years old I remember making my own pinafores and darning the boys' socks!"

"Ah well, you'll teach them all that kind of thing too beautifully—so useful and necessary," declared Nina negligently, "though I'm afraid I've rather a sneaking sympathy for unpractical, helpless creatures like myself. Poor Geoffrey used to tell me that I was too ornamental to be really useful. One can say it at this distance of time, without being thought vain by the unimaginative."

Having thus skilfully precluded the possibility of Bertha's attributing her innocent anecdote to vanity, Nina added tenderly:

"You're so wonderful about clever, practical things, I know. You and I, I always think, Bertie dear, are like Martha and Mary—you know—the two types of active and contemplative, as it were."

Bertie had heard this Scriptural parallel before, and was not in love with it.

"Oh, one has one's hours for dreaming, of course," she replied lightly, but with a distinct frigidity. "But with a husband and house, and those three children, I simply *must* put my shoulder to the wheel."

"Yes, indeed. I always wish I had your sense of responsibility. I'm afraid I'm dreadfully apt to feel that my little songs are all the work I'm meant to do, having once given a son to the nation," sighed Nina, who was aware that her friend had always regretted Hazel's  
exit.

"How is Morris? Does he ever write?" was the subtle rejoinder of Mrs. Tregaskis, uttered in markedly sympathetic tones.

Morris Severing, aged seventeen, and his mother each frequently told their numerous friends in confidence that they did not understand one another. This was untrue—they only understood one another too well.

"My poor Morris!" sighed Nina, "He will see things so differently later on. Oh the blindness of youth, Bertie! It makes one's heart ache sometimes. When I think of the stores of sad, sad, unavailing memories that my poor wayward, foolish boy is laying up for himself, when it is all too late!"

A certain complacency might have been detected in these heartrending glimpses into the future.

But Mrs. Tregaskis said consolingly: "He will learn, Nina. After all, he is so young—only a boy at Eton, for all his ridiculous airs."

"He looks a man already. No one will ever believe I am the mother of that great tall creature—it's simply too absurd. I always think that's the penalty we poor fair-haired people have to pay."

Nina Severing's wavy hair was pale gold, barely flecked with grey, and her enormous eyes had up-curling golden lashes.

"I don't see much penalty about it," Bertha remarked with great truth. "But, of course, in a way it's very much better to have married later in life. One has so much more to give one's children. I was over thirty when Hazel was born, and I'm simply thankful for it. All the added experience and confidence one had acquired—it's all helped to make and form her little life. I do feel so strongly that a mother ought absolutely to make her child, as it were—help it and guide its development along the lines meant for it. You know——"

"Hazel always seems to me such an extraordinarily self-contained little girl," Nina interrupted languidly.

"So she is. She gets that from me. She's nearly as reserved as I was at her age—except, of course, with me."

"Oh, but Bertie dear, don't you think she gets it from her father? Frederick always strikes me as the most reserved man of my acquaintance. Though perhaps that's only the effect of my own reserve, which I believe reacts on shy people."

The quality popularly described as "reserve" is one to which the majority of people cling passionately. Murderer, thief, atheist if you will, but always strongly, impenetrably reserved.

"I give myself away only when I am at the piano," Nina pursued her reflective way. "One's art can never lie."

"You mustn't malign yourself, dear," said Bertie with a hand laid fondly on her friend's. "I assure you no one could really look upon you as reserved—for one moment. I've never thought you so."

Nina gave her well-known childlike smile, and said "Dear Bertie!" with her head rather on one side.

"But you haven't told me about Morris yet."

"Oh, he writes from time to time—poor boy. You know—the kind of letters that tell one nothing. It's so curious that so many many others should come to one for help or sympathy or advice and one's own child prefer to turn elsewhere. At least I suppose he turns elsewhere. Morris is very expansive—quite unlike me," said Nina firmly in parenthesis, "and makes every sort and kind of friend, and confides in them all without discrimination. Some day he will know, I suppose, that he has only one true friend in all the world—his mother."

Bertha was suitably silent for a moment.

Then she asked tentatively: "What does he mean to do later on? Oxford, I suppose."

"I suppose so. Of course, he really is most tiresome about his music, poor boy; he thinks he wants to be a professional pianist."

"Toujours?" inquired Bertha with raised eyebrows.

"Alas, yes! Of course it's a boyish fancy and won't

last—besides, when has Morris ever stuck to *anything*? But you know what opposition is to any boy of that age—he simply enjoys it and poses as a misunderstood genius—not that I should say so to anyone on earth but you, Bertie."

"Nina dear, of course I know that," warmly said her friend, who was perfectly well aware of the extensive area covered by Nina's deepest confidence.

"My dear," Nina Severing declared, with wide-open brown eyes, "it's *absolute* nonsense. As you know, I should be the very last person on earth to quench one single spark of the Divine Fire in anyone, least of all in my own nearest and dearest. But Morris has got absolutely nothing more than an inherited gift, and a certain amount of technical skill because I insisted, absolutely insisted, upon his having really good teaching from the time he was quite a little boy. He hasn't got the temperament to get over the footlights, to begin with."

Bertha Tregaskis, at the slight tinge of expertism discernable in Nina Severing's tones, at once retorted firmly:

"Ah! getting over the 'floats,' in the slang of the profession, isn't easy in any art, as I know from my own small dramatic experiences."

She had some reputation as an amateur actress.

"No, is it?" agreed Nina gently. "I wish you'd talk to Morris a little, Bertie dear, you *are* so sensible, and I know he'd listen to you. He always looks upon *me* as too young, more like a contemporary than a mother, you know. I suppose it's very natural."

She sighed.

"Well," laughed Bertha tolerantly with raised eyebrows, and contrived to insert into the monosyllable a distinct quality of scepticism with regard to Nina's supposition.

"Anyhow," she resumed briskly, after a moment in which to allow Nina fully to appreciate the subtlety of her retort, "I really think Morris might do worse than have a talk with me. I've helped plenty of boys, and of girls, too, for the matter of that, in my time. When Hazel comes out, I tell her, she'll be cut out by her old

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mother. My dear, young men are always telling me they adore me, but, as I say, it's quite safe to adore an old gargoyles."

She laughed heartily, and Nina murmured with the deprecating smile she kept for such speeches, "How ridiculous you are, Bertie. Do enrol my poor Morris into the regiment of worshippers. I'm sure you could. It would do him a lot of good to have his thoughts taken off himself."

"That's what one feels," agreed Bertha. "Self-absorption is a disease with modern youth."

"Introspection carried to the verge of mania," returned Nina, no less psychologically. "When one thinks of what one was at that sort of age, oneself!"

Bertha, however, appeared to feel that one might think of what one was at that sort of age too frequently, and offered her friend no encouragement to pursue this retrospective path.

Instead, she rose from her low seat on the terrace and remarked matter-of-factly that it was too cold to sit still for long.

"Let's go and have a look at the chicks."

"Are their lessons over?" inquired Nina Severing, drawing her furs closer.

She had been wearing them loosely over one shoulder, but such is the effect of suggestion.

"Certainly, or I shouldn't go near them. You know what a disciplinarian I am, Nina, and nothing is ever allowed to interfere with regular hours for my little people. It's more than half the battle, in my opinion. Lessons, a good long walk twice a day in all weathers, and plenty of healthy play in the garden. Hazel thrives on it, and I mean the other two to do the same."

She gave her ready, jovial laugh.

"Lazy little cats, both of them! Rosamund would like to sit over a story-book all day, and Frances says that walks make her legs ache. I don't believe they ever set foot outside the garden in Monmouthshire. Their mother was half a Hungarian, which, I suppose, accounts for it."

"My sympathies are frightfully cosmopolitan, I'm

afraid," sighed Nina, "but I do think you're absolutely right about the children, of course. Fresh air and exercise are so important at that age."

"At any age," laughed her friend. "I couldn't get through my work without my daily tramp."

Nina, with great skill, immediately assumed an appearance irresistibly recalling a fragile hothouse plant.

"As you know," she murmured, "my poor little art has always had to thrive in spite of my wretched health. I'm always trying to think myself a robust woman, but everyone always laughs at me for so much as suggesting such a thing."

She imparted a tinge of pathos to her slight laugh.

Bertha Tregaskis, who did not for a moment suppose that Nina had ever tried to think herself a robust woman in her life, laughed also, but with a marked absence of pathos. Before she could frame a further reply, however, they saw Miss Blandflower and her three pupils.

"Who are these like stars appearing?" absently murmured Miss Blandflower, within sight of them. "Run, Hazel dear, there's mother."

Nobody ran, and the meeting took place with modified enthusiasm.

Nina Severing, who, in the abstract, adored children, did not find very much to say to them, but interspersed her infrequent remarks, which generally took the form of questions, with numerous ejaculatory "darlings" which gave a tone of intimacy to the proceedings.

"Do you remember Morris, darling?" she amiably inquired of Hazel. "He's coming back very soon for his Christmas holidays. Won't that be lovely?"

A month later this agreeable forecast was realized, and Morris Severing was causing his mother acute anxiety in the billiard-room at Pensevern.

"My dearest boy, won't you believe that I know best?"

"Not in this case," said her son with an implication unjustified of their joint past, of innumerable other cases in the back—*and* where he had unhesitatingly accepted his mother's judgments.

"My poor romantic darling," cried the unwise Nina; "because you know nothing of life, *nothing*, you think



that the career of a musician would amuse you, and that it would be all easy success and triumph. But remember that I *know*, and that a far, far greater talent than yours is necessary to be of any use at all, my poor boy."

"That isn't the point," retorted Morris, white with fury. "I don't wish to be a popular success. In fact I'm not suggesting a public career at all, for the present, but simply a year or two's study in Germany."

"Because you think that it may lead to your becoming a professional. If you weren't absolutely breaking my heart, Morris, I could laugh at the futility of such an idea, positively laugh," cried Nina tragically.

"Mother, how can you talk about it's breaking your heart? What can it matter to you if I choose to make music my career instead of some rotten profession for which I have no aptitude?"

"Aptitude! What can you know of the meaning of the word, at your age? Even I, after all these years of study and toil and experience," said Nina pathetically, "should not dare to boast about an 'aptitude' as you do, my poor Morris. The daring of ignorance indeed!"

By these and similar taunts, she always reduced him, in their frequent disputes, to bitter, inarticulate rage and mortification. He stood and looked at her, with his angry young face set. He was a good-looking stripling, with his mother's light tawny hair, and blue eyes set in a sunburnt face. His straight gaze and squarely-shaped jaw would have denoted strength to a writer of fiction. His mouth, as surely, would have typified weakness to an acute observer.

"What's the use of being melodramatic?" cried Nina, gazing at him coldly.

Each knew by intuition the other's vulnerable spot. Morris winced in spite of himself.

"You think that I mind that sort of accusation," he said; "but as a matter of fact, I should only mind it if it were true. I am a great deal too much in earnest to be melodramatic, or to be turned from my purpose by any sneers, mother. I've wanted all my life to be a musician, and you are the last person in the world who ought to discourage me."

"When you talk about 'all your life,' my poor darling, it makes one smile. The life of a child of seventeen! You will want something absolutely different in a year's time. When have you ever been known to stick to anything?"

"I've stuck to this, and I mean to stick to it. Why, mother, you haven't any reasonable grounds for opposing it even. You only say that I haven't got enough talent to make a success of music."

"Well, and who is better qualified to judge? I've had years of experience as a composer, and I've seen as much of the professional life as though I'd belonged to it, as you very well know. People whom I hardly know, and perfect strangers, come to me for advice, and even musicians of experience, because they are wise enough to know that one *can* help them. But you, my own son, and a mere boy, think that you know better than I do. I tell you it's preposterous, Morris!"

He stood silent, glaring at her. "It's my own life," he said at last, sullenly.

"That's a very old argument. But is nothing owing to the mother who gave you that life, took care of your babyhood and childhood, had you educated and taught everything you know, from whom, my poor boy, you even derive what talent you may possess? Why, everything you have in the world is owing to your mother and father."

Morris, furiously conscious that his mother was taking her stand upon false ground yet found no answer to that which he had heard a hundred times before.

"Do you suppose," cried Nina, pursuing her advantage, "that you have a single *real* friend in the world, besides your mother? I know you boast as though you had always been popular wherever you went—you know best how much truth there is in it—but the people who flatter you and say they like you, have all been bought with my money. I've sent you to expensive schools, and allowed you to stay with anybody who asked you, and God knows I'm glad you should have friends and enjoy your youth. You can never say that I've grudged you anything, Morris."

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"Oh, I know very well you've given me every sort of thing," he muttered. "I've never been ungrateful."

"As though I wanted gratitude!" she cried in a sort of holy scorn. "You know very well, Morris, that I love you better than anyone else in the world—you are all I have left—and for seventeen years you've been my only thought, day or night. It's very, very little I ask of you in return—only a little affection and unselfishness. Youth is very hard and ignorant, and one doesn't ask much in return for all one gives."

She suddenly pitched her voice three semitones lower.

"But the day will come, my poor Morris, when you will look back with wonder and bitter, bitter regret, to think that you refused to do the very little asked of you. And it will be too late then."

As a little boy she had always worked on his feelings, since he was impressionable and highly strung, but custom had dulled his sensibilities. But still he could not do more than look at her with anger and distrust in his young tragic gaze.

Nina slowly allowed the tears to well into her enormous eyes. They were always obedient to her summons, as are the tears of most physically delicate women, and, moreover, she was really agitated at the thought that Morris would not accept her judgment as infallible.

"Morris, darling, don't go away from me. I have only you, now, whom Geoffrey left to be my comfort sixteen years ago. If you went to Germany I should not be able to come with you"—Morris looked his consternation at the possibility of such a proceeding—"whereas if you go to Oxford, which is what your beloved father wished for you, you can come back here after a year or two, and we can decide together what you would care to go in for."

"There's nothing for me to do here."

"The place wants looking after. Mr. Bartlett is very good, but he's only the agent. You're too young to understand how very very difficult it has been for me to cope with all the business ever since your father died. I've done it all for your sake, Morris, looking forward to the time when you would be able to take it off my hands yourself. Don't disappoint me."

"I don't want to disappoint you, mother. But you know yourself what it is to care about music. Surely you wouldn't grudge me a few years' study?"

"That could come later, if you still wish it. The idea of your being a professional is absurd, and I will never hear of it, but I don't say I shouldn't let you go to Germany for a while *after* Oxford, though it is naturally very bitter to me that my only son should wish to leave home, and his widowed mother, when there is absolutely no reason for it. It isn't as though you had to earn your own living. Everything I have will be yours one day."

"I can't live on you for ever," said Morris angrily. His father's will, made before Morris was born, had left everything unreservedly to Nina.

"There's no question of your living on me. You are my only child, and everything that is mine is yours," tearfully exclaimed Nina, who gave her son a fixed moderate allowance, and had never allowed him to know the extent either of her fortune or her income, still less to infringe in the slightest degree upon her absolute power as mistress of the estate.

"Besides, I want your help."

A servant opened the door.

"If you please, madam, Mr. Bartlett is here, and would like to speak to you a moment."

Decidedly, the stars were fighting for Nina Severing. She rose, with a gentle, sorrowful glance at her son.

"More business," she sighed wearily, and left the room with her tardy, trailing step.

Morris, left alone, became instantly inspired with a number of conclusive arguments and dignified retorts which should have left his parent defenceless. He went through several imaginary conversations, with eloquence and reason on his side. But imaginary victories are but poor consolation for a defeat. Presently Morris groaned, ran his fingers through his thick hair, and muttered half aloud:

"Thwarted at every step. It's enough to make one take the law into one's own hands and go."

He was always slightly dramatic, even when alone. "What is there for a man to do down here? Mother won't even get a car."

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He reflected gloomily that few other chaps of his acquaintance were unable so much as to drive a motor-car, and then rebounded hastily on to the more exalted plane.

"Besides—music! It's the only thing on earth. I shall go mad if I can't take it up properly."

His eyes lighted up, very much as he meant them to do, with the fire of the enthusiast, and he paced the room rapidly.

Presently a note in his mother's handwriting was brought to him. His brow clouded. Nina's written appeals, of which she was, like most weak natures, prodigal, never failed to irritate Morris, who had not yet learnt to be eloquent on paper.

"Darling," she wrote with many dashes and splashes of her pen, "do not wait for luncheon. I shall be some time with Mr. Bartlett, and cannot interrupt business. Do think over our talk. I had a little surprise for you these holidays, which I meant to tell you later, but perhaps it may cheer you up. I am going to get the car you wanted so much, and Mr. Bartlett tells me he knows of a very good place in Bodmin. We might go in to-morrow and see, and perhaps arrange for some driving lessons for you. It will help you to get at some good music too, and lessons, if you want them, later."

Morris stood confounded. By such unexpected *volte faces* and sudden generousities, did his mother cause all his resentment to appear ungrateful and futile. He felt angry with her, and at the same time touched, and ashamed of his own anger. Perhaps most of all he felt bewildered. Then he thought of the motor-car, his ambition for the past two years. It would make all the difference to Pensevern. He saw himself, a dashing, reckless driver, yet skilled in hairbreadth escapes, leaning back in the driving seat with his cap pulled over his eyes, and one careless hand on the wheel—negligent, cool, yet infinitely competent.

These pleasing reveries were not new to Morris, but they had never before been illuminated by any spark of probability. He was happy for some time. But presently he became once more gloomy.

No number of motor-cars would convey him to Germany or enable him to make music his career. The motor-car was his mother's bribe to keep him at home.

Morris flushed at the thought, and tried to ignore a subconscious conviction, rapidly forcing itself upon him, that a motor-car in the garage was worth more than a career in the future.

It was, of course, absurd. Motor-cars did not alter the whole course of a man's lifetime.

Did his mother really mean it? Morris turned to her letter again. It was explicit enough, and he was also struck by the note of appeal sounded. Inspiration came to him slowly. The appeal of a widowed mother! Might not the whole ambition of a lifetime be worthily sacrificed to *that*? Motor-cars might, as it were, be flung in by an admiring Providence, but they should not be allowed to affect the main issue.

The vision of the dashing young mechanic was hastily relinquished in favour of that of a morose, disappointed man, his career sacrificed to the whim of his mother, his passion for music thwarted by harsh circumstances in early youth.

"The world has lost a great musician there," he fancied might be the sorrowful reply to inquiries about the strong, silent figure whose story would be so well known to every tenant on the estate in the long years to come.

"I will stay. I will give it all up," declared Morris to himself, and felt a genuine pang at the renunciation.

The pang, recurring at ever-widening intervals, was destined to remain a source of satisfaction to him for a number of years.

# V

MORRIS SEVERING reappears in these pages, after an indifferently successful but lighthearted career at Oxford, not as a disappointed genius, but as an extremely good-looking young man, in love with life, with his own universal popularity, and with the goddess of music.

That he should seriously fall in love with a more earthly divinity was at once Nina's hope and her terror. She watched the three little girls at Porthlew growing up rapidly, and spent the long vacations with her son abroad or in London. He was very little at Pensevern until the summer when Mrs. Tregaskis took Hazel and Rosamund to London.

Frances Grantham, only sixteen, and delicate, remained at Porthlew with Miss Blandflower "to keep Cousin Frederick company," Mrs. Tregaskis told her.

Nina was not very much afraid that her son would fall in love with Frances. She was pretty, in a slender, classical style, but lacking in vitality, and though she came up to Pensevern and played tennis and, occasionally, golf, with Morris, she did so with the curious lack of conviction that was characteristic of her dealings with the material world.

From a psychological point of view Frances was infinitely more mature than Rosamund, passionate and unbalanced, or than Hazel, possessed of a sense of humour (which both sisters lacked almost completely), and charming withal; but Nina Severing, with great acumen, decided that only Frances could safely be promoted to the rank of "my little favourite."

Her little favourite, being idealistic and impressionable, conceived a youthful adoration for Nina's gentle tones, appealing prettiness, and tuneful graces, and refrained, with a completeness which spoke highly for Nina's judgment, from transferring any of that adoration to Nina's son.

As for Morris, it was enough that he once heard Frances Grantham, with transparent sincerity, observe that the modern music she liked best was Mrs. Severing's highly successful setting of half a dozen *nouveau genre* lyrics, entitled "Underworld."

"It's rather odd that only one of them should have inherited the mother's gift," observed Nina thoughtfully, after this. "Of course she's no performer, but that curious instinct for *the right thing* is absolutely inborn."

"I didn't know Rosamund was musical," said Morris, purposely and viciously misunderstanding his parent, and moreover making it perfectly clear to that parent's acute perceptions why he did so. She set her lips together and assumed the look of pale self-control that habitually prefaced her most bitter shafts.

"I'm just telling you that *Frances* is the only one of the two who has any music in her. Rosamund is absolutely devoid of it. If you had any spark of the Divine Fire in you, my dear boy, you could not have helped recognizing it in little Frances, even though she can hardly play a note. But, after all, one doesn't expect much perception from youth."

She murmured the last words as though to herself, which added considerably to their effect.

Morris, who was seldom able to think of any satisfactory repartee to his mother's favourite gibe, hastily decided that a good-humoured indifference would best refute it. He gave a slight laugh, shrugged his shoulders so as to make quite sure that Nina did not miss the point of the laugh, and observed lightly:

"I hear Hazel Tregaskis sings delightfully. She always was good, even as a kid."

"Quite good," agreed Nina, with that air of condescension best calculated to irritate her son. "Her voice is a charming one, but, of course, she has to *live* before she can really *sing*." She hesitated for an instant, since the obvious slighting allusion to youth could hardly be brought in without some appearance of repeating a good effect *ad nauseam*.

Morris, with his usual fatal perception, instantly took advantage of her slightly disconcerted pause, for which



he perfectly grasped the reason, to say pleasantly: "I shall be able to judge when I hear her." Upon which, having established his own perfect competence to form an independent opinion, he hastily left the room.

That night they went to dinner at Porthlew, and he heard Hazel Tregaskis sing.

Her voice, as Nina had said, was charming, and she played her own accompaniments.

Nina sat well in the lamplight, an absorbed, dreamy look on her face, and her long, slight fingers slowly twisting her wedding ring, with a gesture which through long years of conscious pathos, had become habitual to her. Frederick Tregaskis, smaller and more wizened than ever, was frankly asleep in an armchair. His wife, devotedly knitting socks, yet contrived to present an attitude of critical intentness for her daughter's performance.

Frances was sitting at the open window, her pure, vague gaze fixed unseeingly on the darkened garden without. Morris scarcely glanced at her a moment.

His eyes sought Rosamund, who had been beside him at dinner.

She was sitting, very still, just outside the circle of light cast by the great standard lamp. Morris had already noticed her capacity for extreme stillness, oddly at variance with the restless questing spirit that looked out of her grey eyes, and certain vibrant tones of her singularly beautiful speaking-voice. Watching her motionless profile, Morris thought that the Slavonic type was strangely emphasized in the sharply defined moulding of the salient cheekbones, sulkily closed lips, and straight black brows. Her skin was very white, and her brown hair thick and silky. Morris thought her very beautiful.

He wondered what her thoughts were, as she leant back in her low chair, immovable. Presently, with that sureness of intuition which is at once a pitfall and a safeguard, Morris perceived that she was listening—intently, with every fibre of her being drawn tense.

Hazel's voice was a soprano of no great compass, well-trained, and with an indefinably pathetic quality which

gave it charm, but the drawing-room ballads she had chosen to give them seemed to Morris trivial in the extreme. He had hardly been listening.

He wondered what Rosamund Grantham heard in the clear soft notes.

When Hazel had sung once or twice, and had received Nina Severing's judicious comments with a sort of half-mocking deference that recalled her father's manner, she turned to Morris.

"Now you'll play to us, won't you?" she appealed.

"Do," cried Bertha heartily. "I haven't heard you for years, Morris."

"His execution has improved, of course," remarked Nina, who was fond of discussing her son's music in his own presence.

"Bodmin teaching is not all it might be," was the retort of Morris, addressed to Mrs. Tregaskis. "I've had to do the best I can by myself."

"My dear boy!" protested his mother, with a laugh that to her son's practised ear betrayed annoyance. "As though you hadn't had the best lessons obtainable in Paris!"

"Half a dozen—oh, yes. They certainly helped me to carry on alone afterwards."

"You've had your mother to help you, my boy; mustn't forget that," suddenly said Frederick Tregaskis from his corner. He chuckled a little: "Mustn't forget that."

"Do play something to us, Morris," interposed Hazel quickly. She looked at him with the eternal laugh dancing in her pretty eyes.

But Morris had turned to Rosamund.

"Shall I?" he asked her, aware of the subtlety of such an appeal.

"Yes," she said gently, looking at him.

Morris possessed an almost irresistible attraction, one which is sometimes the attribute of weak natures—an exceedingly direct gaze.

He looked straight at Rosamund, and his eyes smiled at her.

"Then I am going to play to you," he said under his

breath, with the lightest possible emphasis. He turned to the piano at once, but not before he had seen the colour surge up into her face.

He gave them the gayest, wildest, most heartrending of Brahms' Hungarian dances. When he ceased there was silence for a moment. Nina Severing turned so that the lamplight fell on her long lashes, sparkling a little with tears. She always cried a little at music which deserved to be called good, and she had never heard Morris play so well.

"Thank you, Morris," said Bertha, less exuberantly than usual. "That's a glorious thing—always rouses the gipsy in me. It's so full of life and joy and ecstasy."

"There is something curiously *poignant* underneath that ecstasy," murmured Nina, partly to account for the sparkle on her eyelashes and partly to make it clear that Bertie did not by any means know all that there was to be known about Brahms.

"Thank you very much," softly said Hazel, elliptical, after the fashion of the modern generation.

"It's your turn again now. Please sing this," he said, with an engaging mixture of supplication and command in his tone.

He had picked up one of the songs strewing the table, almost at random, but she took it without demur, and advanced to the piano. Under cover of the opening bars he moved straight to where Rosamund sat in the shadow.

His eyes sought hers, with a question in them. For a minute she remained quite still, her dark head bent. Then she raised it, and he saw that her eyes were blazing with intense excitement. "Oh it's glorious," she breathed, "to be able to play like that! It takes one right away from—all this." She looked contemptuously at her surroundings.

"Do you care so very much?" he asked under his breath. "Is music all that to you?"

"But I'm not musical," she said with defiant honesty. "It only makes me forget everything else."

Understanding flashed into Morris's expressive face. At the same instant Nina turned towards him with a sharp

hissing sound of distress and a prolonged "Hush-sh—Morris."

He was silent instantly.

When Hazel's song was over Nina Severing asked for her motor.

"It has been so nice, dearest," she murmured, embracing her hostess. "I've missed you too dreadfully all the summer, and now you'll be off again in a week, I suppose."

"Oh yes, escorting my two young gadabouts to various country houses. I'm an old-fashioned woman, and don't let my girls stay away alone, you know, unless I'm very sure of the house they're going to. One would prefer one's own chimney-corner, of course, but that's neither here nor there."

She laughed cheerily.

"For the matter of that," cut in Hazel incisively, "I should much prefer the chimney-corner myself, mother, and so would Rosamund. You know how we've begged you to let us spend the autumn here in peace."

"Oh yes, yes, yes," scoffed her mother good-humouredly. "I've heard little girls say that before, my darling."

Nina, too, laughed softly.

"We mothers make our sacrifices for these young things in spite of themselves," she declared lightly. "Good-night, Hazel. I hear you dance better than any girl in London. Make the most of your time, my dear. Good-night, Francie dear. Why, you've been as quiet as a little mouse all the evening. It's very hard to play Cinderella, isn't it, with your two ugly sisters going to the Ball every night?"

They all laughed as though the time-worn allusion had not been made with almost daily regularity by Miss Blandflower.

Frederick opened the door and Nina swept gracefully into the hall. Frances ran eagerly for her cloak, and the others came out more slowly.

On the dark threshold of the porch Morris spoke to Rosamund.

"I want to see you—I want to talk to you," he said

urgently. "Can't I play to you again—just to you all alone! Though for the matter of that I played that Brahms to you. You did know, didn't you?"

He spoke with an odd inconsequence that was characteristic of his ardent, eager temperament.

"I thought perhaps you did," she murmured, not coquettishly, but almost sadly, with a sort of uncertainty in her voice.

"Can't I come over to-morrow! I must come. Where shall I find you?"

"Where's Morris?" called Bertha Tregaskis.

"Coming," he cried, and gave Rosamund one look before dashing into the hall.

She did not speak to him again, but he held her hand for an instant at parting and said "Good-night, Rosamund," blessing the wonderful privilege of childhood which had allowed him always to use her Christian name.

Only a week and she would have gone away again! But doubt and diffidence were almost equally strangers to Morris, and he wove illimitable dreams into that space of eight days as he drove from Porthlew to Pensevern in the dark of an August night.

The following afternoon he went to find Rosamund. She had given him no trysting-place—had not even said that he might come—but Morris knew no uncertainty. He did not go to the house, but sought the shade of the terrace, and found her alone, in the short avenue that led to Bertha's cherished rock-garden.

She was even paler than usual as she gave him her hand, and Morris, with the intuition that was always his surest guide, greeted her very gently and gravely.

"Where were you going to?" he asked. "May I come with you?"

"I was going into the orchard. It's cooler there. The others have gone out."

Morris did not dare to ask her why she had not gone with them. He longed to hear her make the admission that she had been waiting for him, but contented himself with walking beside her in silence as she directed her steps towards the sloping paddock that had been converted into an orchard.

There was a wooden bench set in the furthest corner, and Rosamund sat down there without speaking. Morris flung himself upon the grass.

There was silence.

Then Morris, looking up at her, said:

"Tell me about everything. Everything that the Hungarian dance made you feel last night, and why you say that you're not musical, and—everything."

She did not tell him everything. But she told him, with a curious mixture of childish simplicity and of a most unchildish vehemence, a great deal; more even than she knew.

Morris listened, understood in a sort of passion of sympathy, and looked all the while at her beautiful, unsmiling face.

He noticed that she was strangely impersonal. She hardly spoke of people at all, except once, when she said, "I have always got Francis. I love her better than anyone in the world." Of her guardian she did not say anything. But a lesser intuition than that of Morris Severing would have felt an intense rebelliousness to be the keynote of her whole life at Porthlew.

The magic afternoon sped by, and the shadows lengthened across the grass.

Hazel Tregaskis called "Rosamund!" from the terrace, and they looked at one another with eyes that had suddenly awakened to another reality.

Morris sprang to his feet.

"Thank you, Rosamund," he said softly.

Suddenly the laugh appeared again in his blue eyes.

"Do you know, we've known one another four—five—years, and I've never really found you till last night!"

"I don't think I found myself till you played the Hungarian dance," Rosamund told him seriously.

Hazel did not express any surprise at seeing Morris Severing. He surmised that she would not often express surprise. The charming assurance which characterized her seemed to imply that Hazel Tregaskis would accept or ignore very much as she chose, with little or no reference to any standards but her own.

"Have you come to tea, Morris?" she inquired easily.

"Mother's on the terrace. Isn't it a shame to think of leaving the garden and everything next week?"

"Yes," said Morris energetically. "It's perfectly rotten. Where are you going? Must you go?"

"I suppose so," she returned, shrugging her shoulders.

"We've both told mother how much we should prefer to refuse invitations to shooting-parties, but she won't hear of it."

"You'll enjoy them when you're there," morosely remarked Morris, with a sudden vision of Rosamund watching some ass bringing down partridges by the dozen. Morris was not a good shot.

"That's the worst of it!" cried Hazel with mock pathos. "Of course I shall! I always do enjoy going anywhere, and then mother says, 'What did I tell you?' Now Rosamund at least has the satisfaction of being consistent. She is quite genuinely bored wherever we go. She didn't even enjoy going to dances."

Morris looked much relieved.

"Didn't you really?" he asked Rosamund.

"Not much," she admitted.

It was the last satisfaction that he obtained that afternoon. Mrs. Tregaakia, with a readiness born of long habit, made her guest useful by requesting him to roll the tennis lawn, while Rosamund and Frances hunted languidly amongst the bushes for tennis balls lost the previous afternoon. Hazel had prudently disappeared.

"Economy, economy!" shouted Mrs. Tregaakia blithely, and hacked with a raquet at the long grass concealing the roots amongst which possible tennis balls might be imbedded.

Morris wondered if the same admirable virtue caused his hostess to refrain from inviting him to stay and dine at Porthlew that evening, but when she showed no such inclination at seven o'clock he felt obliged to exclaim:

"I say, how late it is! I must be getting back."

"Give my love to your mother," said Bertha cordially.

"She must come over again before we go up North."

"I'll drive her over," declared Morris with alacrity.

"Good-bye."

All that evening he was haunted by Rosamund's deep

eyes, by the sound of her sweet, serious voice. He told himself exultantly that he had met his ideal, and that he, and he alone was capable of loving her as she should be loved. He also cursed himself as a cold-blooded fool for not having told her then and there of his love. What senseless scruple had restrained him? He resolved to see her again the next day.

Rosamund, that night, lay awake till dawn in an excitement that was as utterly out of proportion as were all her emotions. She told herself, in pure and single-minded earnestness, that this, which was to transmute her life to gold, was different to anything else in the world.

Morris, who had fallen in love before, also told himself, with fiery determination, that this was different to anything else in the world.



## VI

"THE sooner I pack up my young lady and take her off to Scotland, the better, I think," said Bertha decisively.

"It's all so silly," sighed Nina vaguely. "But I really don't know—I shouldn't mind it, you know, Bertie, if he seriously wants it—only I think he's too young. I've always hoped he'd marry a daughter of yours, and Rosamund's as good as your daughter, though between ourselves, I've always been fonder of both the other two."

"Well—it may do very well when he's a little older. But don't take it too seriously, Nina, my dear; it's only a violent admiration for a pretty face."

"He hasn't been proposing to her, or anything ridiculous of that kind?" asked Nina nervously.

"Not that I know of, dear. He must know very well that, situated as he is, he can't possibly think of marrying—unless, of course, you made it possible for him."

"Of course, in a way, I want to see him married."

"Not at that age, dearest. Why, the boy can't know his own mind."

"No. Poor Morris! And he is frightfully unbalanced."

"So's she," said Bertha Tregaskis quickly. "Her be a right-down fulish li'l maid, I tells 'er."

"Oh, you've spoken to her?"

"Only laughed at her in a wholesome way, my dear. Neither she nor Frances have a vestige of humour about them—everything is always *au grand sérieux*. That's one reason why I don't believe she and Morris would ever really suit one another."

Nina deftly seized her opportunity.

"Morris certainly has inherited my sense of humour," she observed pensively.

"Why, the other day he laughed so much at one of

those stupid dialect imitations of mine, that I simply had to stop and chuckle myself. It was too infectious," cried Bertie, with a laugh at the recollection.

"Poor boy!" smiled Nina tolerantly, and leaving it uncertain whether or not she was pitying Morris for his easy appreciation of Cornish rusticisms as rendered by Mrs. Tregaskis. "But, seriously, Bertie dear, it would be no bad thing if later on they are both in earnest—only just at present I think we'd better be hard-hearted, and not let it come to anything definite."

"It's unlucky that visit of ours having fallen through," observed Bertha thoughtfully. "It keeps us here for another ten days before the Scotch visits, and I can't very well forbid Morris to come to the house."

"He's there morning, noon, and night, I'm afraid," sighed Nina.

"Oh, well, I flatter myself that I know how to manage a youngster of his age. I'll see if I can't get an opportunity to make Master Morris see reason."

The opportunity was ahead of her.

At Porthlew Rosamund, coming downstairs, saw Morris wandering aimlessly round the hall.

At the sound of her footfall he looked up, and came towards her, impetuous and good-looking.

"Oh, Morris!" she cried.

He was halfway up the stairs and had caught both her hands in his.

"Rosamund, darling!" The grip of her strong, slender hands answered his, but there was a sort of questioning sound in her exclamation.

"Dearest," said Morris with gentle surprise, "you know I adore you, don't you? Don't you love me?"

Mrs. Tregaskis, entering the hall briskly, in spite of her long, hot walk, found them on the stairs, Morris holding Rosamund's hands in his, and gazing up at her with adoration in his handsome, boyish face.

"Tut, tut, what have we here?" cried Bertha, with sufficient lightness in her tone to render a reply unnecessary. "Rosamund, you ought to be out of doors on a day like this. Waste of God's own sunshine to coop

yourself up with a book. I shall turn you and Francie out on the moor the minute lunch is over."

"Francie has a headache," said Rosamund, with the quick, deferent gleam in her eyes that her guardian's cavalier treatment of Frances' numerous minor ailments always roused.

"She won't get rid of it by sitting indoors," returned Bertha decisively.

"Morris, you'll stay to lunch, will you?"

"Thank you," he said, rather naively surprised. Mrs. Tregaskis had not been prodigal of invitations recently. A vista of the moorland sweep and Rosamund opened before him, only to be blotted out by the voice of Mrs. Tregaskis, its native ring of good-humoured decision somehow emphasized:

"You and I will have a little ploy of our own, Morris, when I've driven my lazybones out to take some exercise. I want a chat with you."

She nodded, with her implacable kindness, and asked where Frances was.

"In her room," said Rosamund rather sullenly. "She is lying down."

"Lying down at twelve o'clock in the morning!—and on a day like this," added Bertha, with another reproachful glance at the cracked, baking ground and still sunlight outside. "Is her head very bad?"

"Yes."

"I must go and investigate. I expect she needs one of my special compresses of eau de Cologne and cold water. Well, well!"

She began to mount the stairs slowly, making no attempt to disguise that her walk had slightly tired her.

"Stairs are no joke, at my age," she panted laughingly over her shoulder to Morris; "and with my figure. I be growin' a bit broad-like across, ma dear!"

Morris laughed, and watched her disappear up the first short flight of stairs. He turned to Rosamund rather shyly. Shyness was not at all inherent in Morris Severing, but the advent of Mrs. Tregaskis and her few crisp, kindly sentences, had somehow cut across the atmosphere

of joyous security in which he had met Rosamund that morning.

As he turned to her, Bertha's broad face, reddened by heat and exertion, appeared over the balusters.

"Rosamund, my dear, come up here a minute, will you?"

Rosamund gave Morris a look in which appeal and defiance seemed oddly to mingle, and in her turn disappeared.

Morris Severing was left disconsolate in the hall. It was of no amusement to him, although he gave the purely perfunctory laugh of civility, when Miss Blandflower, hovering on the threshold of the porch, said to him with a nervous laugh:

"Monarch of all you survey, I see."

"Have you been gardening?" he inquired with polite superfluity, at the same time relieving her of an earth-encrusted trowel and a basket overflowing with plantain and dandelion roots.

"Oh yes," she giggled. "Those *horrible* weeds! There's no rest for the wicked."

"But you're not wicked at all, Miss Blandflower," he assured her gravely. "Only too good, to tire yourself like this. Come and rest in the hall."

Minnie looked doubtful.

She compromised by hovering restlessly between the hall-door and the window, thereby keeping Morris on his feet, while she gazed longingly at the sofa, set under the cool of a huge stand of white daisies and geraniums.

"Very hot," she sighed, passing an earthy hand over her heated face. "Well, if you won't think me too fearfully lazy——"

Miss Blandflower was always protesting feebly against accusations that no sane mind could ever have entertained against her.

"Of course not. I should be much happier if you'd only sit down till lunch," said Morris with truth. The exhausted Minnie sank down thankfully, murmuring "A so-fia is always a luxury, isn't it," and the next moment bounding agitatedly to her feet as the gong

reverberated through the hall, and Frederick Tregaskis was heard emerging from the study.

Minnie looked at her large earthy hands with an expression of horror, muttered something about would these little hands never be clean, and fled.

It was with a sense almost of fatality, as though such a thing must inevitably happen where Miss Blandflower was concerned, that Morris watched, without having time to prevent it, a collision between her and her host at the foot of the stairs.

"Oh, Mr. Tregaskis," shrieked Minnie, "I beg your pardon—I'd no idea—so stupid of me."

"Do not apologize," said Frederick, in tones of ice and casting a look of concentrated venom at the overwhelmed Miss Blandflower. "And pray do not be late for luncheon."

"I've been gardening," she gasped, displaying the trophies of toil in unattractively blackened finger-nails and hardened palms.

"So I perceive. I believe the gong has sounded?"

"Yes, oh yes. I feel I've earned my lunch," cried Minnie, disappearing as fast as she could.

"My wife's protégé," remarked Frederick, as usual carefully disassociating himself from his spouse, "has, to my certain knowledge, made that remark before every meal for the past fourteen years."

"I'm sure it's a very true one, sir," said Morris with what he supposed to be a ready courtesy, and only the expression of rather sardonic amusement which his host disconcertingly turned upon him at intervals throughout the meal, betrayed to Morris that his ready adaptability had led him to make an almost too apropos rejoinder to Frederick Tregaskis' peculiar form of pleasantry.

Morris sat between Hazel and her mother, and was able to look at Rosamund on the opposite side of the table. She hardly once raised her eyes to his, but when she did so, he saw a light in them that brought an answering ardour to his own gaze.

He had hardly a glance to spare for Hazel Tregaskis, whose tawny hair seemed to radiate sparkles, even as her charming personality radiated vitality. Frances,

beside her, looked pale and languid, with dark circles round her eyes, and as soon as luncheon was over Morris heard Mrs. Tregaskis say to her affectionately:

"You'd better go upstairs to the boudoir, Francie, and curl up on the sofa. I'll come up in a minute and see if we can't find something for the poor head."

"Thank you, Cousin Bertie."

Mrs. Tregaskis looked round, almost like a general arranging for the dispersal of a superfluous staff.

"Hazel, on with the hat again! I'm not going to have you dashing out in this sun with nothing on your head. I suppose you and Minnie want to go up to the moors? and you must take this lazy child with you."

She laid a possessive hand upon Rosamund's shoulder.

"Dear Mrs. Tregaskis, there's that tiny *wee* little patch down by the pond that I meant to finish this afternoon," breathed Miss Blandflower, evidently uncertain whether she was supposed to be pining for moorland air, or eager to finish her weeding.

"No, no, Minnie." Mrs. Tregaskis' tone left no further room for doubt upon the point. "You did far too much this morning. You know I'm always telling you not to choose the very hottest time of day for weeding. I dare say Morris and I will turn our energies to that patch by the pond, and surprise you when you get in. Now then, off with you!"

"But am I not to go to the moors too?" demanded Morris, half amused and half vexed, and wholly desirous of an afternoon in Rosamund's company.

Bertha appeared to consider.

"How would it be if we took up tea to them, later?" she said, with an air of suggestion. "That's what we'll do, and you can help me to carry the tea-basket. I dare say Francie will be able to come with us by that time, poor child. It will be cooler for her."

"Good-bye, you dear people. We shall meet again later—under the wych-elm, Minnie, you know. Four o'clock."

Morris dashed out and opened the gate for them.

"You'll walk back with me," he said hurriedly to Rosamund, and read her answer in her eyes, before turning

back with discontent in his own, to where Bertha Tre-gaskis awaited him.

She surveyed him with unabashed gaze.

"Well, you think I'm an interfering, tiresome old spoilsport, don't you, Morris? But I really must have a talk with you, and I don't feel you're going to be very angry with me somehow. After all, we're very old friends."

She laughed at him with a sort of friendly pleading in her look, and Morris laughed a little too. He had always liked his mother's friend.

"Let's sit down in the shade, and leave the weeding till it's cooler. And now, my dear boy, I'm going straight to the point. I always face up to my fences boldly—at least I used to, in the good old days when Frederick could afford to keep a couple of gees in the stables. You mustn't make love to my little girl."

Morris, to his fury, felt himself colouring hotly. He could not think what to say.

"You see," said Bertie, carefully looking away from him, "it isn't as though you were both of you a few years older. You've neither of you seen anything of the world, and Rosamund is in some ways very undeveloped and young for her age. I don't want either of you to take this attraction seriously—at any rate for the present."

"Has my mother been talking to you?" demanded Morris rather sullenly.

Bertha hesitated for a moment.

"She's only said what I felt quite sure of already—that she thinks you too young to entertain any idea of—marriage, for instance."

She looked at him narrowly as she spoke, and Morris coloured again.

"Of course, I couldn't think of that, exactly," he stammered naively. "You know quite well that, owing to my father's preposterous will, I haven't anything but what she gives me."

"Exactly, my dear boy, though you and I both know very well that she only holds the whole thing in trust for you, as it were."

"Rotten arrangement, I call it," muttered Morris.

"Of course, I practically do all the business that old Bartlett used to do for the estate, but it's a bore being tied here and never my own master. I should have been in Germany studying music for the last four years if mother hadn't made such a frightful fuss at the idea."

"I wish you and she understood one another better," sighed Bertha. "My sympathies are always on the young people's side, you know, Morris, though your mother is my greatest friend."

"Really?" he said eagerly. "Then I wish you'd talk to her a bit."

"But, Morris, what could I say? I can't let Rosamund drift into a sort of half-and-half engagement, you know. It isn't fair to her, and I am responsible for her just as though she were my daughter."

"Why should it be 'half-and-half'?" he asked rather defiantly.

"Because she's too young, and has seen too little of the world, for me to sanction anything else at present," said Bertha decisively.

Morris was slightly soothed by the fact that she laid all the emphasis on Rosamund's youth, and not on his own, as he felt his mother would have done.

"Look here, Morris," said Bertha earnestly. "I'm asking you for Rosamund's sake to have a little patience. If this is the real thing, it won't do you any harm to wait for a year or two, or her either. It'll help you to know one another better, too. Why, you've not seen her since you were both children, except for this last week."

"I *knew* the first minute I saw her again," cried Morris eagerly and boyishly.

"I know she's very attractive," said Bertha, smiling rather proudly, "though I say it as shouldn't, since she's just like my own daughter. You know I've had them since their mother died, Morris."

"I know," he said.

"Well, then, don't you think I've got just a little right to be consulted?" She looked at him so humorously that Morris laughed a little.

"Yes, of course. I expect I'd want to consult you,



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anyway, on my own account, you know. You do so understand about things, Mrs. Tregaskis."

"You dear boy! That's just the very nicest thing you could have said to me. I love young people, and it's always been a disappointment to me that I didn't have ten children. You see, I had to adopt two as it was! Rosamund is a dear child, Morris, and I've loved her as much as though she were my own."

She suddenly sighed, and some unexplained instinct made Morris exclaim rather defensively:

"And of course she adores you. I'm sure of that."

"Ah well, my dear boy, one doesn't expect very much. The thing I care most about is that they should be good and happy and keep well. Which reminds me that I must go and see after my poor little invalid. But, Morris, I do want to ask you one thing, if you'll remember that I'm an old woman and not get angry with me."

She paused a minute and he cried eagerly:

"Of course, you can ask anything you like. You know that."

"I really believe I can, you're so reasonable. Well, Morris, I don't want to know what's passed between you and Rosamund, though I rather fancy that little *tableau vivant* that I came across in the hall this morning wasn't strictly within the rules, but I do ask you not to let things go any further for the present. Rosamund is going up to Scotland with me in ten days' time, which will make things easier, but I want you to show a man's self-control and see less of her than you have been doing lately."

Morris looked his consternation.

"Why don't you go away altogether, if that is the only way, and come back again after we're safe out of the way?"

She did not give him time to reply, but rose, and began walking back to the house.

"Think it over, while I'm seeing after Frances, and we can finish our talk when I come back."

"But look here"—Morris, colouring deeply, had caught up with her in one or two long strides—"it sounds a most rotten thing to ask—but—but what will Rosa-

mund think ! She—she must know perfectly well that—that——” He began to stammer helplessly, and Bertha’s level tones came with cheery common sense to his rescue.

“My dear boy, Rosamund is a very pretty girl who has been out a year and a half, and has met with quite a reasonable amount of admiration. She is much too sensible to take things seriously until they really become so.” She hastily dismissed from her recollection certain of the strictures recently passed upon Rosamund in conversation with Nina Severing.

“Don’t you think I’m in earnest, then !” demanded Morris.

Bertha looked at his flushed, youthful face, ardent with indignation.

“I’m quite sure that you are,” she said quietly, “and it depends on you not to let Rosamund become so, or at any rate think herself so. I am going to trust her to your honour, Morris.”

On this lofty note she left him, going into the house with a certain rapidity of step that might have suggested some anxiety not to spoil a good exit.

But Morris was a great deal too much absorbed in his own reflections to draw any such conclusions.

He paced up and down the front of the house, his hands in his pockets.

He did not analyze his sensations, and so escaped the humiliating knowledge that his principal emotion was one of satisfaction at Bertha’s admirable understanding. He wished that his mother could have heard her.

The wish, however, was a subconscious one—his main preoccupation was with the approaching interview. That there would be an interview between himself and Rosamund he took for granted. They would walk back from the moor together that very afternoon, and he would have to tell her that he was going away.

Morris thought of her brilliant, ardent gaze and clinging hands, and kicked the gravel about fiercely.

“Why can’t I be my own master,” he thought angrily. Unwittingly the thought intruded itself that were he his own master, he should not make use of that inde-

pendence to curtail it by the decisive step of marriage at the age of twenty-three.

"Damn," muttered Morris. "Why aren't things different all round?"

The desirability of a society where love-making should be smiled upon by parents and guardians with no ulterior thoughts of an announcement in the *Morning Post* to the effect that a marriage had been arranged, had had time to impress itself forcibly upon Morris before Mrs. Tregaskis rejoined him. She looked troubled, and Morris, attributing her expression to anxiety on his behalf, remarked with more than a touch of magnanimity:

"Look here, it seems to me that things work out this way, more or less. I'd better say good-bye to her this evening, and go off yachting somewhere. And then by the time I get back I suppose she'll be in Scotland."

Bertha's brow cleared a little as she looked at him.

"Shake hands, Morris," she said quietly. "You're a white man."

"You know, I shan't leave off caring about her," he said wistfully. "I shall never love anyone else."

"My dear boy, in two or three years' time there'll be absolutely no objection to you telling her so. And there's nobody I should be gladder to give her to. But I do think that for the present this is the only way."

Her words woke in Morris a fleeting recollection of Sidney Carton, and the realization of his own self-abnegation almost overcame him.

"Let me take that tea-basket," he muttered hastily.

"Isn't Frances coming?"

"I'm afraid not. I've sent her to bed altogether. To tell you the truth, Morris, I'm a good deal worried about her, and if she's no better this evening I shall ask you to call at Dr. Lee's on your way to Pensevern, and send him up here. She's got a temperature—though, of course, that doesn't mean much with her."

"Is she so delicate?"

"She's much stronger than she was when I first had her," said Bertha decidedly. "But if she's not better next week I certainly shan't leave her. The other two will have to pay their visits alone. Poor Francie! She'll

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be miserable at my not having the change, but I couldn't leave her."

"You're awfully good," murmured the boy.  
She laughed heartily.

"I'm only an old hen fussing over her brood. It's all in the day's work, Morris, and if it does mean giving up time here, and some little pleasure or comfort there, one doesn't think twice about it. But don't let's talk about me. Fat old bodies of my age," said Bertha, striding vigorously across the garden, "aren't at all interesting. I consider myself as dull as ditchwater, and of no earthly use except to give you young things a helping hand now and again."

"I think you're the most understanding person in the whole world," said Morris with conviction.

## VII

THE picnic up on the moor, regarded as an *al fresco* entertainment, was not a success.

Rosamund's brow grew dark from the instant when she demanded, rather than inquired, of her guardian: "Where is Francie?" and received the placid reply that Cousin Bertie had thought Frances would be more comfy tucked up on her bed.

"And you are not going near her till to-night, my dear little girl," she added, with a touch of genial severity. "She'll do much better without you."

Bertie exchanged a laughing glance of amusement at her own hard-heartedness with Miss Blandflower, and Morris saw Rosamund flush the angry scarlet of a sensitive child that thinks itself unjustly treated.

She sulked frankly for the rest of the time, and only the prettiness of the defiant mouth and chin which was all that Morris could see under her big shady hat prevented him from feeling provoked with her.

He and Hazel kept up a cheerfully desultory conversation, while Miss Blandflower pressed unwanted attentions upon her hostess and fellow-guests.

"Mayn't I pass you a rock-cake, Mrs. Tregaskis?" she pleaded. "Some bread-and-butter then? You're not eating anything!"

"I be doin' nicely, thank'ee, ma dear. What'll yu be takin'? Crame?"

"No—no, thank you—not for me. Nothing more at all," distractedly said Minnie, who had been nibbling at a small piece of bread-and-butter in the intervals of her activities.

"Oh, but you must have a jam sandwich," cried Morris with the pseudo-heartiness characteristic of such occasions.

"Well—if you won't all think me fearfully, fearfully greedy——"

Minnie hesitated and looked wildly round her, but as no one appeared in the least aghast at the prospect of her depredations among the jam sandwiches, she deprecatingly took the smallest one, murmuring, "Thank you muchly—this is fearful gluttony—'just one more crust,' as the boy said on the burning deck."

The spasmodic conversation died away.

Presently Hazel said:

"I've found the place where we got that white heather last year, mother. There are some more roots there, if you want to take them home for the rock garden."

"Come on and let's dig then," said Bertha vigorously, rising as she spoke.

Morris shot Hazel a glance of gratitude.

He longed to be alone with Rosamund, even while thinking that he was dreading the pain of bidding her good-bye.

He looked at Miss Blandflower, but Hazel Tregaskis was quicker than he.

"I shan't find the way without you," she declared lightly.

"Come on, Minnie," shouted Mrs. Tregaskis, already well on ahead.

"There's no rest for the wicked," said Minnie mechanically, and went.

Rosamund's first words were not at all what Morris had expected. She looked at him sombrely, and remarked almost violently:

"Do you know what's the matter with Frances? Is Cousin Bertie really frightened about her?"

"No, not seriously, I don't think," he answered, instinctively anxious to soothe her. "She only said that if Frances wasn't quite well again next week she wouldn't go to Scotland, but would send you and Hazel alone."

"I shan't go if Francie is ill."

He looked at her, astounded.

"But, Rosamund, what's the matter? She isn't ill. Mrs. Tregaskis herself said that a temperature didn't mean anything at all with Frances."

"Oh, you don't understand," she burst out angrily. "Nobody understands in the least what Frances is to me. Cousin Bertie has never understood, and never will. You heard what she said just now."

He had forgotten.

"That I'm not to go near Frances till to-night. She always treats me like a child."

She looked very like one indeed, as she spoke, flushed and indignant.

"Perhaps Frances was going to sleep, and doesn't want to be disturbed."

"As though I should disturb her! Why, I've looked after her ever since she was a little girl—until we came to live here. *Now*," said Rosamund bitterly, "I'm told to mind my own business and let Frances mind hers."

"Never mind," consoled Morris. "Don't let's talk about it. I want to tell you something, Rosamund."

Her angry face softened a little, but she seemed unable to dismiss the subject.

"Nobody has ever understood about Frances and me—ever. I feel more as though she were my child than my sister."

Morris was becoming heartily tired of the discussion, and showed distinct traces of that fatigue in his tone, as he replied perfunctorily:

"Of course I understand—but, really, she's only three years younger than you are, isn't she?"

"Cousin Bertie is always harping on that, and telling Frances not to be domineered over!"

"Rosamund!" cried Morris, "you really talk as though Mrs. Tregaskis was always being unkind to you. I can't understand you. Why, she simply adores you both—just as though she were your mother."

He was totally unable to understand why Rosamund, at this, turned the fury of her eyes full upon him.

"You don't understand, any more than anyone else."

"Don't understand *what*?" almost shouted Morris.

"I don't understand you, when you talk like that."

Nor did he. She seemed to him altogether unbalanced, and as different as possible from the stately, wonderful Rosamund whom he had met in the orchard at Porthlew.

"Why do you speak as though Mrs. Tregaskis was unkind, or unsympathetic?" he asked more gently. "She is devoted to you. You can't think how proud she is of you, Rosamund."

"I'm not her daughter."

"She *feels* as though you were. She told me so herself."

"I wish you hadn't let her talk to you about me at all," said Rosamund unhappily.

"I don't think you'd say that if you knew how nice and understanding she was. I—I wish I could explain better."

Morris felt the impotence of his lame and stammering words before the deep hostility, which he recognized, although he was at a loss to account for it, in Rosamund's silence.

"I haven't ever told anyone," she said at last, stammering a little, "but I've always resented being told that Cousin Bertha has done everything for us and is so fond of us. Of course it's quite true in a way, but she's never made me happy—or Francie either."

If Morris thought that the fault lay more on Rosamund's side than on her guardian's, he would not say so, but his too expressive face betrayed him to Rosamund's quick perceptions.

"You think I'm ungrateful—but I do recognize all the material things she's done for us."

Morris thought her explanation very ungracious, and then chid himself half-heartedly for criticizing his goddess.

"She's done more than material things, hasn't she?" he reminded her gently. "It's not as though Porthlew had been an alien atmosphere. She cares about all the things that matter—books and music and friendship and other things too. That's what makes her so wonderful, I think—that she should have that side to her, as well as the splendid practical capable side that everyone can see and admire."

Rosamund looked at him, with a face that seemed to have grown weary.

"Yes, of course," she said slowly.

Morris felt, unreasonably, as though he had been



weighed and found wanting, in the balance of that baffled, tired gaze of hers. He reflected with bewilderment that although she had looked at him like a child when she had spoken defiantly and angrily of her guardian, she now looked very much older, and more unhappy.

"What is it, Rosamund?" he asked, half involuntarily, and conscious of the futility of the question.

"Oh, I don't know," she said drearily.

It was the discontented child again.

Morris remained silent, plucking at the tough strands of heather all round him.

He felt injured.

He had come out on to the moor prepared to sacrifice himself, to bid Rosamund a long farewell, and to take away with him only the memory of that bitter-sweet parting hour. Surely the intuition of love should have met him more than halfway. But Rosamund, with childish perversity, had harped upon the string of her own grievances, grievances which Morris could not but feel to be for the most part imaginary ones. She was not thinking about him at all, and all his wealth of love and self-sacrifice had gone unheeded. Morris began to feel angry, and, worse still, as though he were being made a fool of in his own eyes.

It did not calm him to reflect that he would probably appear in exactly the same light to the penetrating gaze of Bertha Tregaskis.

She was even now advancing slowly towards them, stooping every now and then to prod at some little root or plant and pull it up into her capacious basket.

Morris got up abruptly.

"Rosamund, do you know that I'm going away?"

She looked almost as much startled as he could have wished.

"When, Morris? Where?"

"At once," he said gloomily. "I don't know where—or care."

He had meant to ask her if she would "wait for him" in the time-honoured phrase, but he had not reckoned on having to cram the whole parting scene, as it were, into the last three minutes of his interview.

Rosamund also looked at Bertha's advancing form and spoke rapidly.

"I didn't know you meant to go away, Morris."

Was her voice trembling a little?

"I didn't!" he cried passionately.

Bertha hailed them with a prolonged "coo-ee" that might have been regarded as superfluous in view of the fact that only some rapidly diminishing hundred yards now lay between them.

"I didn't," repeated Morris earnestly, and was unable to resist adding, "but—it's the only way."

He also made use of that excellent phrase, for which he was beholden to Mrs. Tregaskis, in conversation with his mother that evening.

It was more than wasted upon her.

"I don't know what you mean by 'the only way,'" she returned with a sudden irritating assumption of common sense, her lack of which she habitually dwelt upon with pensive complacency.

"If you want to go yachting, Morris, well and good; but don't talk in an affected melodramatic style, as though you were making some great sacrifice in going, please. It doesn't ring true, and you know how I hate little insinuerities."

Nina's assault was perhaps not utterly unprovoked. A certain jutting forward of her son's jaw, a tendency to monosyllabic replies preceded by the slight start of one roused from a profound reverie, had conveyed to Nina all too accurately that Morris was enacting, in his own opinion, the rôle of *jeune premier* in a drama of self-sacrifice.

"I've already told you that you can start on this yachting trip whenever you please, so why talk as though it were some tremendous decision which you had just come to?" she demanded irritably.

Morris smiled with a superior expression.

"You don't understand, mother," he told her, with a touch of compassion.

Few remarks were more calculated to rouse her annoy-

"My dear boy, it's perfectly childish to talk like that. How can there be anything about you which I, your mother, can't understand? It makes one realize how very very young you are, when you talk like that."

But even allusions to his youth could not disturb Morris's exalted mood.

He was unable to resist giving his mother a hint of the heights to which he had attained.

"I was up at Porthlew this afternoon," he said in a meaning tone.

"So I supposed. You always come back in this silly, self-satisfied frame of mind when you've been with those girls, who naturally play up to your vanity. If that's the effect of the Grantham girl's influence, Morris, the less you see of her the better, for your own sake."

The fatal word "influence," combined with the preposterous implication that Nina had slightly forgotten Miss Grantham's very name, roused Morris to anger at last.

"Rosamund Grantham and I have said good-bye, mother. It was the only way. Some day I shall come back to her, and find her waiting," said Morris, considerably worked up by the pathos of his own eloquence, and momentarily forgetful that he had received no such pledge. "But you make it impossible that I should tell you anything of what I am going through, when you speak as you did just now."

He walked with sorrowful dignity to the door, confident that his mother would not allow him to leave the room without giving him further opportunities for rhetoric.

Nina, in effect, finding herself driven to her last resort, with a readiness born of much experience, began gently to cry.

"Darling, you know I didn't mean it if I spoke impatiently. I only want to sympathize with you and comfort you."

He turned slowly towards her.

She was deeply relieved that the *affaire* Rosamund should have been successfully tided over. Morris was far from being as heartbroken at the idea of parting from his love as he had been before their final interview, and

the evening passed amid a harmonious rendering of a strong man's grief and his mother's tender sympathy.

Preparations for his journey absorbed Morris for the next twenty-four hours, during which he and his mother enjoyed the sense of perfect companionship which was always theirs on the rare occasions when their respective mental *tableaux vivants* of one another happened to coincide, and then he was off.

"Good-bye, my darling boy. Enjoy yourself."

"Thank you, mother dear. Write to me and"—his voice took on the slightly deeper note consecrated to the strong-man-in-grief attitude—"tell me any news of *her*."

"Yes, dearest, of course," tenderly replied Nina, but she refrained from telling him the only piece of news which transpired during the next few days: that Frances was not well enough for Mrs. Tregaskis to leave her, and that Rosamund had refused to accompany Hazel to Scotland, but remained with her guardian at Porthlew.

"It is tiresome of her," said Bertha, in a tone more nearly resembling annoyance than she often used.

"Frances isn't seriously ill at all, and if she were Rosamund would be the worst possible person for her. She goes about looking like a tragedy-queen, as though Frances were at death's door."

"Why on earth did you let her stay?" said Nina with more derision than sympathy in her voice.

"She asked Frederick. You know how tiresome and contradictory he can be, and of course he knew perfectly well that I didn't want Rosamund fussing and fretting on my hands, but he said she could do as she liked. He always takes up an absurd attitude of having no authority over those two, as you know."

"I know. So Hazel has gone alone?"

"I've had to send my maid with her, though I should have done that in any case. I don't approve of young girls travelling about all over the country by themselves."

"Lucky for you that you have girls who can be chaperoned! Look at poor little me—I can't run after Morris, let alone send a maid with him, and have to sit here with a trembling heart, wondering all the time how things are going with him."

"That's always the way with a son, my dear, or a husband either," said Bertha, determinedly emphasizing the fact that she, although not the mother of a son, also possessed a male appendage.

"It's our part just to sit at home and work and wait, while they have all the fun," Nina sighed. "A woman's life is one long self-sacrifice," she murmured.

"It is, when one has to mend and make and nurse, and all the rest of it," cordially agreed Bertha, with one fleeting glance at Nina's exquisite, empty hands, folded in her lap.

The glance was not lost upon Mrs. Severing, who presently said reflectively that Mr. Bartlett would no doubt call upon her shortly with some of his interminable business questions, and she must ask dearest Bertie to forgive her. It was not her way to put off a matter of business.

"Unpractical, dreamy creature that I am," said Nina with a sad, sweet smile, "I have had too many years hard training in looking after this big estate, ever to be unbusinesslike. Mr. Bartlett always amuses me so much when he will say that I should make a better agent than he does."

"I don't wonder!" exclaimed Bertha, the dryness of her tone making it abundantly evident that her emphatic assent was directed towards Nina's amusement, and not towards Mr. Bartlett's opinion of his employer's abilities. "No, no, dear. You must stick to your charming songs. They're your work in the world," smiled Bertha tolerantly.

"Dear Bertie! How sweet of you to say so. I'm always afraid of being just some silly, trivial flowery thing—not of any real use in the world."

"The world needs its little speedwell flowers just as much as its sturdy oak-trees," laughed Bertha tenderly.

"Yes, dear," said Nina deftly. "There is room for Mary as well as for Martha. It always comforts me to remember that."

Comfort, however, was not the predominant expression on the face of Mrs. Tregaskis as she heard her friend's favourite Scriptural parallel once more enunciated.

"If you're really waiting for Mr. Bartlett, darling, I

mustn't keep you," she said rather hastily. "Anyhow, I must get back to my invalid. She's much better to-day, and only fretting at the idea of my having missed the Scotch visits. Of course one *had* been rather longing for a breath of Scottish air, this weather, but I dare say I shall manage without. It's an economy, at all events."

She gave her cheery, plucky laugh.

"How is Morris enjoying Norway? Has he got over his love-lornity?"

Nina laughed a little.

"I think he has. I've had a very cheery letter from him, raving about the fiords and things.

Bertha looked slightly puzzled.

"The——? Oh, you mean the *fjords*! Yes, of course they must be perfectly gorgeous at this time of year," she remarked thoughtfully, with the air of a connoisseuse.

"They are just the same at any time of year, dear," sweetly returned Nina. "Geoffrey and I went there for a fortnight once—it seems oh so long ago! It somehow made one think of those far-away days when everything was *couleur de rose*——"

There were few topics that Bertha enjoyed less than the retrospective *couleur de rose* of her friend's married life, and she hastily dragged the conversation back into the living present.

"I'm so very glad about Morris. Give the boy my love when you write. I wish Rosamund was half as sensible as he is. She goes mooning about the place as though she'd lost her dearest friend."

Bertha gave a slightly apologetic laugh at her own acerbity, and Nina, whose regard for Rosamund always waxed in proportion as her friend's waned, murmured with the air of a compassionate angel:

"Poor child! One remembers the heartaches of one's own youth. The thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts, Bertie!"

"Well, Morris appears to have curtailed his successfully enough, at all events," crisply returned Bertha. "I always said there was stuff in the boy, Nina, although you've spoilt him so outrageously."

Nina laughed, and kissed Mrs. Tregaskis affectionately as they said good-bye.

It always pleased her to be told that she spoilt Morris. She had consistently over-indulged him as a little boy, and did so still in all matters where his personal pleasures were concerned, provided that they did not interfere with her wishes. The accusation of spoiling seemed to add colour to her frequently-voiced conviction that youth was very hard, and that a mother's sacrifices often went unheeded.

"I'm afraid I have spoilt him," she sighed in response to Bertha's words. "But after all, Morris has been my only thought for so many, many years. . . ."

Bertha told herself that really poor Nina was sometimes positively maudlin, and firmly created a diversion by demanding the loan of Nina's seldom-used garden scissors.

"At all events," she told herself, as she walked briskly away, "I managed to forestall an allusion, for once, to poor Geoffrey. And now for my little tragedy-queen!"

But Rosamund, though not undeserving of her guardian's epithet, gave less trouble than Bertha had anticipated. With characteristic want of balance, she was absorbed in one thought only: that of her sister. As long as Frances remained ill, Rosamund gave little thought to Morris Severing. Perhaps the measure of her undeveloped lack of proportion might have been probed by that fact. The memory of a spoilt illusion might come to vex and grieve the youthfulness of her spirit later, but that would only be when the nearer, and to her infinitely more real, solicitude had ceased to be.

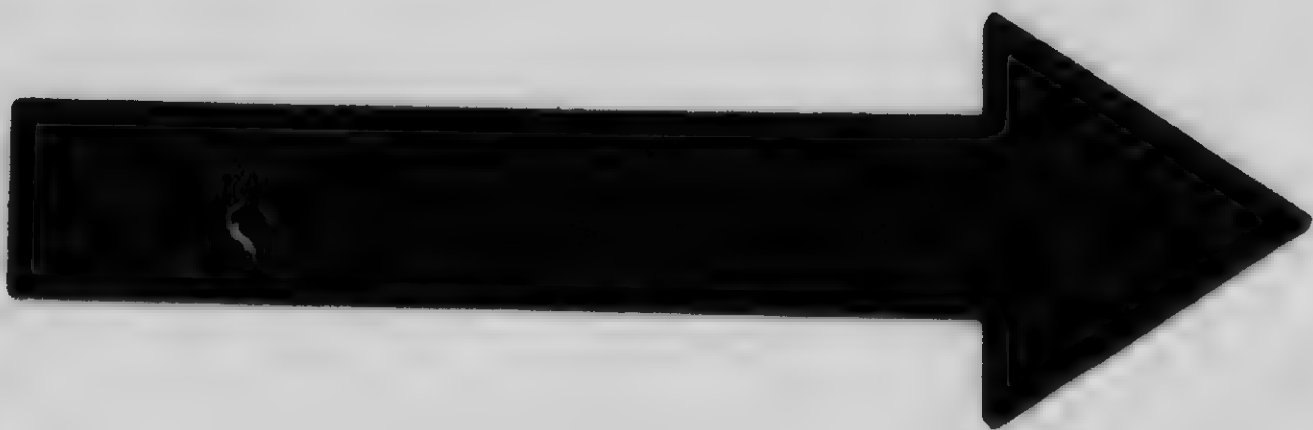
And Rosamund, her outlook being honest, knew, and ~~was~~ to know more clearly yet, that her first love had brought her no nearer to that reality which lies at the back of all wisdom, and which for her was still typified by her love for Frances.

### VIII

"ROSAMUND!" wrote Hazel from the North. "The most marvellous things in all the world are happening. I am in love—with a man who wears an eyeglass—(you know how I've always hated an eyeglass) and he is in love with me. He is Sir Guy Marleswood, and he's thirty-four, and quite six foot, and I don't think I should mind if he were five foot nothing. I *know* I shouldn't. I've known him a fortnight, and yet we both feel as though we'd known each other all our lives, and yet it's new and wonderful all the time. It's indescribable. There's one thing—which I have to keep reminding myself of, but which will assume enormous proportions as soon as one begins to do anything—I mean, write to mother, or wear an engagement ring. (He's given me a most beautiful one, a ruby marquise, only I won't wear it.) He's been married before, and he had to divorce his wife five years ago. I knew it before we met, because the girls here had been talking about him, and said that was why their mother had not asked him to stay in the house, but he came to the dance, and he is staying at the Ludleys', a mile away. That's where we met, and I've seen him nearly every day since—and the days when I don't see him are just *hell*—only knowing that Heaven may open again at any minute.

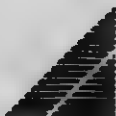
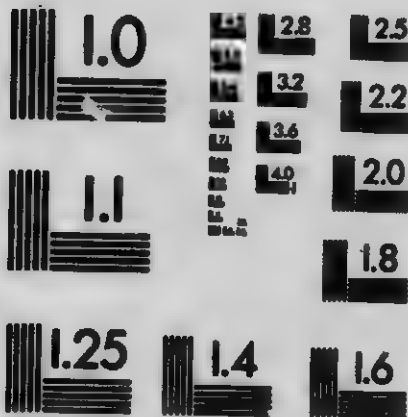
"Rosamund dear, I know now that I was a fool ever to let boys make love to me or propose in the sort of half-and-half way that a boy does—asking one to wait for him because he may have enough to marry on in fifteen years' time, and meanwhile exchange photographs and write every Sunday afternoon. You know the sort of thing—that does to tell other girls about, and sentimentalize over when a waltz that you used to dance with him is being played. But when it's the real thing—when a man tells you that he cares for you and asks you to





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be his wife—it's absolutely and utterly different. Guy asked me the fifth time he saw me. He told me about his wife first. The odd thing is, that I don't mind. Of course I shouldn't mind about the moral part of it, anyhow—I mean whom God hath joined together and all that—but I don't seem even to mind about his having once loved her and married her. They only cared for one another a very little while, and it's all past and over. The present is ours—and more glorious and wonderful than any words can ever say. As for the future—he says he is going to marry me before the end of the year. And I am to put off my other visits and come home this week, and then he will write to daddy, and come down to Cornwall. Of course it isn't daddy that counts at all, since I can manage him perfectly, but I have a sort of an idea that Guy will get exactly what he wants, even out of mother. He's the sort of person that does.

"We haven't told anybody anything. I haven't the slightest doubt that Lady Alistair has guessed, and the girls too, but even if she writes to mother it'll only bring things to a crisis rather sooner. I'm writing to her myself this evening, so she'll know by the time you get this.

"I'm not afraid of anything or anyone in the world. Guy and I have found one another, and nothing else matters. Besides, I *know* he'll manage everything!

"As ever,

"Your loving

"HAZEL."

If Hazel's letter brought a strange wondering sense of disquietude to Rosamund, and that not wholly on her cousin's account, the much shorter note which she had sent her mother apparently produced no such effect. Bertha appeared at luncheon with a brow but slightly corrugated, and only an added tinge of briskness in her manner to betray perturbation of spirit.

"I see you've had a letter from Hazel by the mid-day post, Rosamund," observed Miss Blandflower in the middle of luncheon, with a praiseworthy desire to dissipate the slight atmosphere of constraint which had lately been

noticeable at meals, in spite of the valiant and hearty efforts of Mrs. Tregaskis. "When does she return to the bosom of her family?" She gave a slight giggle in lieu of quotation marks.

Rosamund hesitated, felt her cousin Bertha glance sharply at her, and answered nervously:

"I'm not sure—soon, I think."

"She has two more visits to pay," said Mrs. Tregaskis coldly. "You knew that, Rosamund."

Her husband looked up suddenly.

"She's coming back on Friday. You knew that, Bertha," he said mockingly. "I understand that our parental sanction is required to an engagement of marriage. Very gratifying, I'm sure, in these emancipated days."

Miss Blandflower turned startled eyes from one to the other of Hazel's parents.

"They say one wedding makes another," she sighed with nervous inappositeness. "But is it really—who is it . . . ?"

"My dear Minnie, Hazel is a silly little girl who ought never to have been allowed to pay visits without a chaperoning mamma. It serves me right for having relaxed my rule—but one can't be in two places at once, and really these young ladies require such a lot of looking after!"

Bertha sighed gustily.

"One only wonders how you can manage in the marvellous way you do, with so much upon your hands," said Minnie, feeling that this remark, although far from being original, came at any rate from a safe stock, and might be more acceptable than further questions.

At all events it steered the conversation into smoother channels, and no further allusions were made in public to Hazel's affairs, until three days later, when Hazel herself returned to Porthlew.

Rosamund was instantly conscious of an indefinable change in her cousin.

Self-possessed Hazel Tregaskis had always been, but the youthful security of her manner had somehow deepened into an impression of inward assurance that held

less of self-confidence, and more of some larger stability, that would not be easily shaken. When her mother greeted her with matter-of-fact warmth, and said gaily, "Well, my little girl, I'm glad to have you under my wing again; I think it's the last time we must let you go gallivanting off on your own for the present," Rosamund saw that Hazel did not give the petulant shrug or grimace with which the girl Hazel would have received such a greeting, but looked at her mother with a strange, remote look that held something of an almost impersonal compassion.

It was that same look, Rosamund thought, which angered Mrs. Tregaskis when her daughter resolutely asked her for an interview that evening.

"No, my darling; I'm not going to let you stay and chatter now. You've had a long journey, and must pop off to bed early. We'll have a long talk to-morrow. Dad and I are not at all angry with you, but I've had a letter from Jessie Alistair, and it's quite plain that I ought never to have let you go and stay away without me. Now run along with Rosamund, my pet."

"What did Lady Alistair say?"

"I shall talk to you about that to-morrow. I am not at all angry with you, Hazel, but one thing you and Rosamund may as well understand, since I suppose you've told her all about it. You may flirt with boys of your own age, if you like, and have all the fun that's natural and proper, but——" Bertha Tregaskis paused. She spoke with a quiet and good-humoured implacability, her hands resting on her broad hips, and her resolute mouth set firmly. "*But*—to flirt and get yourself talked about with a married man, is—a—thing—I—don't—allow. See, darling?"

Rosamund caught her breath and looked at her cousin. Hazel, who seldom or never blushed, had flushed the slow, deep crimson of a woman who hears herself insulted.

"Sir Guy Marleswood is not a married man," she said slowly. "At least, neither he nor I think so, which is what matters, after all. He divorced his wife five years ago. He has asked me to marry him."

"Very well, darling. When he writes and asks the

permission of your parents, we shall see. But a man of four- or five-and-thirty, who has led the sort of life that he has led, does not generally want to marry a little girl of nineteen, even though he may be dishonourable enough to play at making love to her."

But this agreeable theory was shattered next day, when Sir Guy Marleswood wrote a formal statement of his position, and an almost equally formal request for his daughter's hand in marriage, to Frederick Tregaskis. He also stated unemphatically that the following day would find him at Porthlew Railway Hotel.

Thereafter, Rosamund watched the storm break over the household with a strangely aching heart.

Bertha regarded Sir Guy as a married man, and said so staunchly. Frederick Tregaskis, whom Rosamund had never yet heard to agree with his wife, declined to view the question from an ethical standpoint, but declared Hazel too young to enter upon a marriage which would of necessity be regarded more or less dubiously by the world in general.

"Wait another five years," he remarked grimly to his daughter, "and see if you can't do better for yourself than a divorced baronet fifteen years older than yourself."

"No," said Hazel, her small face set like a flint. "He wants me to marry him now."

"I dare say. And I want you to wait. I suppose you owe something to your father?"

"Yes," she said, and began to cry. "But not everything in the world. I owe something to myself. It's my life."

It was the passionate cry for individualism that Rosamund had heard from Morris Severing.

But Hazel Tregaskis, unlike Morris, was directing all the energies of her will into one channel. And Rosamund, watching, saw those energies guided and strengthened day by day by the stronger force that held steadfast behind her.

Guy Marleswood was not of those who fail.

Before the close of that year, the day came when he extorted from the exasperated Frederick: "Marry her,

then. I see you mean to do it, both of you, and it may as well be with my consent as without it. Anything to put an end to the subject."

"Thank you, sir," said Sir Guy imperturbably. "I will go and tell Mrs. Tregaskis that we have your consent to the marriage."

"You will do nothing of the kind. I shall tell her myself. I may as well get some satisfaction out of it," said Frederick viciously.

He sought his wife in the library, where she sat, looking unusually disheartened, amid a pile of leaflets.

"Bertha, you are about to be relieved of one of your responsibilities."

"I'm thankful to hear it," she returned wearily.

"I have decided to give Hazel into Marleswood's keeping."

"Frederick! You can't. You're mad. A child of nineteen—and a marriage that's no marriage—she'll be no more married in the eyes of God than if she were openly living as that man's mistress."

"I'm not concerned with the eyes of God," said her husband in detached tones. "It's perfectly evident to mine that if we don't give our consent they mean to do without it, and I don't choose to have my daughter making a runaway match. We had better give in gracefully while it is still possible, Bertha. Marleswood is not the sort of man to heal a breach, if it came to that."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that we don't want to be cut off from the little girl for ever after her marriage," said Frederick, his voice shaking a very little. "That's what it'll mean if we let her go from under our roof in defiance, Bertha."

"Hazel is an infatuated, self-willed child, but she is not heartless," cried Bertha.

"I do not intend to put her to the test." Frederick Tregaskis had regained his habitual dryness of utterance.

With unwonted consideration, he added a word of consolation for his wife.

"I may as well tell you that I am perfectly satisfied that Marleswood is a good fellow in every way, and devoted to her. The whole thing, after all, amounts to

a question of conscience, which she is entitled to judge for herself."

"She's not," flashed Bertha. "She's only a child, and ought to accept the ruling of her parents until she's old enough to judge for herself."

"I have no doubt," said Frederick drily, "that all parents, taken as a class, would agree with you. Unfortunately for ourselves, however, we have passed into an era where the individual, and not the class, will rule."

He walked out of the room, looking older and more deeply lined than ever.

Rosamund found Mrs. Tregaskis, who never broke down, weeping violently among the piles of disordered pamphlets.

"Cousin Bertie! Don't!" cried Rosamund fearfully. "Is it about Hazel?"

Bertha raised a piteously mottled and disfigured face.

"I'm beaten," she cried. "Frederick has consented to this iniquitous marriage, and nothing can stop it now. My little girl, whom I've brought up to be good, and to whom I've tried to teach religion—that she should be willing to break my heart, and rush deliberately into sin, the first time temptation comes near her!"

"No—no. It's not that. She doesn't think it's sin. She doesn't believe it's sin—not for an instant. Her point of view is different."

"Her point of view!" cried Bertha bitterly. "How dare you talk to me, a woman of fifty, of such preposterous nonsense. You and she are children; you know nothing of life, you've had no experience. How can Hazel judge of what is right or wrong? She's a child—a child."

In the vehement repetition of the assertion, it seemed to Rosamund that she found her clue to Bertha Tregaskis's impotent suffering. She would not, could not, admit in her daughter any claim to the rights of an individual.

Hazel's judgment, unrecognized by her mother, carried with it no amazement to Rosamund.

Certain faiths, certain scruples and acceptances inborn in Rosamund and Frances, had been the veriest lip-service to the child Hazel always. Rosamund recognized



in her the purest and most natural type of highly-evolved paganism.

"You know, Rosamund, I'm not doing anything wrong, although they won't believe it. It isn't wrong to me, and I don't believe in an abstract right and wrong. Each individual case has its own laws."

"Should you do it if you thought it *was* wrong?"

"I don't know," said Hazel thoughtfully. "I can't imagine seriously believing that it would matter to God, one way or the other. Should you? Frances wouldn't, one knows."

"If I did it," slowly said Rosamund, "it would be as a deliberate choice between good and evil. I should believe myself to be breaking God's law—but I might do it, if I thought it worth while."

She knew that if, as she said, it seemed to her worth while, no laws of God or man should bind her. But she would break them of deliberate intent, whereas to Hazel Tregaskis they were non-existent, myths designed for the wanton frightening of children.

Rosamund recognized the absolute sincerity of Hazel's point of view, and sometimes found herself wondering what Sir Guy's might be. One day, very soon before the marriage, she held an odd little conversation with him, standing in the wintry sunshine of the terrace. Frederick Tregaskis was ahead of them, grimly poking with a walking-stick at a little drain that was choked with leaves.

"He's been very kind to me," said Sir Guy abruptly, indicating with a gesture the odd little figure.

"I think that he really likes you very much," said Rosamund. "And though he would be very angry at being told so, I have always known that Cousin Frederick adores Hazel."

Sir Guy nodded with full comprehension.

"Yes, of course. She knows that, too. It's been the best thing in her life so far—that and having you and your sister here." He paused for a moment or two.

"You know," he said slowly, "I want to try and make up to her for everything that she hasn't had, so far. She ought to have everything. She seems, somehow, so made for happiness."

"I have never seen Hazel sad," said Rosamund, rather surprised. "I think she is happy by nature."

"Yes, though an atmosphere which might perhaps seem an unsympathetic one——"

He left the sentence unfinished, and it required no effort on Rosamund's part to conjecture his meaning. Sir Guy resented, none the less implacably that his resentment was expressed by implication only, the attitude of Mrs. Tregaskis towards her daughter. That Hazel herself had never resented it, and had only opposed to it the bright glancing hardness of her impenetrable self-confidence, did not, Rosamund felt, in any way diminish his perfectly silent ire. Mrs. Tregaskis herself would be forced to recognize that in this man fifteen years her senior, Hazel had found champion as well as lover, knight as well as comrade.

Rosamund turned away with an aching heart, wondering dimly whether her need had not been greater than Hazel's.

After the formal consent given by Frederick Tregaskis, there had been no further discussions between Sir Guy and Mrs. Tregaskis. She accepted her defeat with the sort of grim gallantry that would always be characteristic of her, and, as far as Rosamund knew, attempted no appeal to Hazel. But she aged more perceptibly in the weeks before Hazel's marriage than during all the five years that Rosamund had passed at Porthlew.

No other indication that her guardian recognized defeat was evident to Rosamund's eyes. Her manner to her daughter was what it had always been—kindly, authoritative, at times possessive. She admitted Sir Guy's claims to much of her daughter's time, and even seemed disposed, gradually, to concede to him rights which he had not tried to arrogate for himself.

"You mustn't let this little person be too much in London," she observed, with a hand upon Hazel's shoulder. "We're very excitable, and it knocks us up. I had to be a very strict mamma and bring her home long before the dances had come to an end last year."

"If we take the St. James' Square flat, there is no

reason why we shouldn't spend all the week-ends Hazel likes at Marleswood."

"Well, I don't know about week-ends," said Bertha doubtfully. "They're not very restful. I think a home in the country and an occasional fling in London must be Hazel's programme."

She spoke with her customary matter-of-fact assurance and kindly good sense.

Sir Guy fixed his objectionable monocle more firmly.

"That," he observed in a detached manner, "is a decision which I shall leave entirely to my wife."

If Mrs. Tregaskis found it necessary to readjust her forces after this, the readjustment was made silently and without delay. But it was very shortly after that, when it only wanted a week to Hazel's wedding-day, that Rosamund again found Cousin Bertha in the library, struggling with hard, choking sobs. Hazel hung over her, caressing her with most unwonted demonstrativeness and with tears in her own pretty eyes. But that they were tears of the merest surface pity and tenderness was abundantly obvious even without the gently mournful observation which she made to Rosamund that evening.

"Poor mother! I hate to see her minding it so, but you know, Rosamund, I *can't* feel as unhappy as I ought."

"Don't you wish—sometimes—that you'd waited, as they begged you to? It would have been the same for you in the end."

"The same for me, and the same for them," returned Hazel crisply. "They wouldn't have liked it any better ten years hence—at least mother wouldn't. I believe daddy's reconciled already. Mother wants me to be happy, but in *her* way."

"Are you really happy, when you know she is miserable?" spoke Rosamund with more curiosity than compassion. Hazel coloured, but faced her cousin with unflinching honesty.

"Yes," she said, "I am. It's of no use to pretend, Rosamund. I am happier than I have ever been in my life. Of course, I should have preferred it if everything had been straightforward, and there hadn't been all this fuss, and having to extort a consent—but it would have

been just the same if they hadn't given it. Do you know, that's the pathos of it, to my mind—they couldn't do anything. Guy and I would have married without their consent, just as much as with it."

"He asked you to, I suppose," said Rosamund, as though stating a fact.

Hazel pushed her curling tawny hair from her forehead.

"He asked me if I would, if it came to that, and of course I said yes. But we both knew it wouldn't come to that, and that mother would have to give in. I used to think that if one's parents forbade a thing, it became impossible *ipso facto*, but it doesn't. *They just can't do anything at all.*"

To Rosamund, Hazel had summed up the situation in that sentence.

They could not do anything at all.

The wedding took place quietly at Porthlew, and they said good-bye to Hazel, radiant-eyed, and clinging in an unwonted embrace to her father at the last moment.

Then she drove away with her husband, and Miss Blandflower, in a piping soprano, remarked to Rosamund:

"It's like a death in a house, isn't it? But we must all try and take her place, now."

The suggestion drove Frederick, snarling disgustedly, into the study.

Frances went quietly to put away some of the litter in Hazel's room, while Rosamund, feeling herself useless and in the way, yet hung helplessly in the vicinity of Nina Severing, who had remained with Bertha in the drawing-room after the departure of the few guests.

But no word of Morris reached her.

Nina was murmuring consolation to her friend who, for once inactive, sat gazing heavily into the fire.

"After all, dearest, the young birds will fly out of the old nest and leave it desolate. It's nature."

Bertha groaned.

"It's not the selfish loss to myself that I mind, Nina, but the thing she's done. If I were giving her to some simple, honest boy of her own age, how gladly I'd see her go. We mothers don't ask more than that, after all—just to see the children happy."

"I know," breathed Mrs. Severing. "It's all one lives for."

"I've no plans or wishes for myself—it's all for them," muttered Bertha disjointedly. "What else has one to care about—an old gargoyle. . . ."

Nina straightened herself slightly.

"'Having outlived hope, fear, desire . . .'" she quoted softly, at the same time turning her long neck so that the firelight fell upon her burnished hair and exquisite, appealing profile.

"A man she's only known a few months," pursued Bertha bitterly. "And she'll disobey her parents, the mother who's loved and guarded and cherished her all her life, and break their hearts, for his sake."

"God grant the poor child may not regret it bitterly one day," breathed Nina piously.

There was a long pause.

"Well!" said Bertha, and slowly stood up. "There's a lot to be done."

"Do let me help you, dearest."

"Thanks, Nina, if you would. The girls are somewhere, I suppose."

"Ah, they'll be a comfort to you, I hope. They who owe you even more than Hazel does, if possible."

"One does what one can. It seems to me that it's all give, give, give on our side, and take, take, take on theirs. I feel rather like an unfortunate pelican feeding its young, sometimes."

With the words, and the curt laugh that dismissed them, Bertha Tregaskis regained possession of herself.

## IX

ROSAMUND, though unhappy, was not as unhappy as she would have liked to think herself. The defection of Morris Severing, although gaining in poignancy by contrast with Hazel's serene happiness, was a sorrow of the emotions only, and a certain fierce sincerity of outlook prevented Rosamund from rating it otherwise.

But she felt that she could have borne it better had the disappearance of her quondam lover touched the mainsprings of her life, and left that life dignified by a lasting grief, instead of merely rendered unprofitable and savourless from an unrecognized sense of vague discontent.

"I don't know what Rosamund's grievance is!" her guardian was exasperated into exclaiming, nearly a year after Hazel's marriage. "I don't believe she knows herself."

And, in so saying, diagnosed the case.

Rosamund Grantham, after the manner of the modern generation, had yet to find herself, and suffered accordingly.

It need scarcely be added that she did not confine her sufferings to herself.

Frances, overwhelmed by the difficulties of reconciling responsiveness to Cousin Bertie's bracing councils of self-reliance, with submission to Rosamund's intensely protective and rather overpowering solicitude, sought more frequently than ever the soothing society of Nina Severing.

That gentle soul was passing through a period of storm of which she presently confided the outline to Frances.

"Sometimes, darling, as I sit here alone through the long evenings, I wonder if my life might have been different if I'd been a more religious woman. You see, Francie, I married very, very young. I wasn't much

older than you are now. My husband was not a man who believed in any very definite creed, and I was young enough to be altogether influenced by him."

It was ever Nina's custom to lay the errors and omissions of her past at the door of Geoffrey Severing and her youthful marriage.

"Should you like to be a Roman Catholic?" asked Frances suddenly.

"It's a very beautiful religion, and of course beauty is a religion in itself, to an artist," said Nina thoughtfully. "Why do you ask?"

"I've often thought," said Frances very shyly, "that I should like it myself. It seems such a thorough-going sort of religion. When we were little, my mother had a Catholic maid—an Irish girl—and she used to tell us a lot about it. And she was so particular about not eating meat on certain days and going to Mass every Sunday. She had to walk quite a long way, but I don't believe she ever missed going. Of course she was very superstitious, and used to want us to wear medals and charms and things, but some of the prayers she taught us were nice. My mother was a Catholic by birth, too, though she never went to church or anything."

"If I were anything, I should certainly be a Catholic," said Nina with extreme conviction in her tone. "It's the only creed which appeals to me in the slightest degree. It is so beautiful—all that music and those touching ideas about the Virgin and everything."

"But—don't you believe?—isn't the Church——?" murmured Frances, embarrassed.

"Dear child, I am afraid the orthodox forms mean very little to me. I would never wilfully cause pain to any human being, and I try to help the sadness of the world with my little songs, but that is all. But I would never shatter the innocent faith of another soul, although I have outgrown the need of form and ritual myself."

"Does one outgrow it?" wistfully asked Frances, whose whole nature unconsciously craved the discipline which is inseparable from any creed, faithfully followed out in practice.

"Not all of us," tenderly said Nina, conscious of the

exquisite contrast between the matured, self-reliant soul, made strong through suffering, and the innocent, inquiring child at her knee. "Not all of us, dear. Some plants need a support round which to cling, whilst others stand alone—always alone." Her voice deepened slightly as she mused broodingly for a moment on the pathos and beauty of this horticultural parable. It came as a slight shock when Frances, generally the most sympathetic of listeners, observed in unmistakably self-absorbed accents:

"I think that I shall always want a support. It seems to me that I am meant to live by rule—not by my own judgment at all. That's why I like the Roman Catholic idea of the Church being infallible. It would be such a guide."

Nina was aware that to no one else would Frances have spoken so unreservedly, and the reflection was soothing, but it did not prevent a slight stiffening of tone in her reply.

"Really, dear? But the surest guide in the world is the golden rule which I have tried to live up to all my life—*Never think of yourself at all*. Somehow, if one gives all one's thoughts and time to other people, one finds that God takes care of the rest."

Nina was herself rather surprised at the beauty of the sentiment as she put it into words, and it served to restore her not very deeply ruffled serenity.

"I will lend you some books, Frances, if you really want to know something about various creeds. The religion of Buddha is, to my mind, the most beautiful of them all," reflectively said Nina, who had once read portions of Sir Edwin Arnold's translation of the "Light of Asia," and was persuaded that she had studied it deeply. "It was the foundation of the Roman Catholic religion, of course—they borrowed a great deal from it."

"I should like to read it very much."

Frances wanted to read anything which spoke, however indirectly, of Roman Catholic doctrines. If Nina guessed as much, however, she did not impart her surmise to the vigorously orthodox Bertha Tregaskis.

That this discreet reticence had been justified was



made superabundantly evident when Mrs. Tregaskis first became aware of the Romanistic tendencies of her ward.

"People of seventeen must do what they're told," she said serenely, but with an undercurrent of severity. "When you're one-and-twenty, Francie, we'll talk about it again, and meanwhile I strongly advise you not to think about the subject. You are much too young to decide such a matter without knowing a great deal more about it, and from your own showing all this simply arises from restlessness and desire for excitement. Religion is too serious a matter to be played with, my dear little girl."

A certain look of flintlike impenetrability came over Frances' young face as she looked at her guardian, and she said nothing more. But Mrs. Tregaskis was much too acute to suppose that her silence denoted submission.

"Take her to London," growled Frederick, when his wife, in her perplexity, put the case before him. "You ought to get her away from that silly woman's influence."

Bertha did not ask "What silly woman?" since she rightly recognized that her husband thus denoted her dearest friend, but she decided to follow his advice.

"We'll have a month in London, and see all the sights," she cried. "Just you and I and Rosamund, Francie, and be regular country cousins, and go to the National Gallery and British Museum, and a theatre or two from the dress-circle. Never mind about planting the bulbs, dear—no, I don't mind leaving them to Grant, and the garden must just get on without me for a week or two."

She stifled a sigh heroically.

"This trip is absolutely for the sake of the girls," she told Nina Severing. "Neither of them takes any natural healthy interest in gardening or in the animals and things, as Hazel used to do, so I must try what London will do for them. Really, girls *are* a problem."

"Nothing to a boy," sighed Nina. "There's Morris wandering half over Europe, in the most unsatisfactory manner, pretending that he is studying languages, and really doing nothing at all except loaf. I've told him

he ought to come back and look after the place in earnest, but he makes one excuse after another——"

"It's too bad," said Bertha sympathetically. "Perhaps if he came back, now that he and Rosamund are a little older and have rather more sense . . ."

"Oh, my dear! he's got over that nonsense long ago. I always told you it wouldn't last. 'Weak and unstable as water,' that's what my poor Morris is."

Bertha did not remind Mrs. Severing that everything had been done to insure the instability of Morris in this particular case. She only said affectionately:

"Well, good-bye, Nina darling. Don't forget to take pity on my old man, since I can't drag him to London."

"He must come and cheer me up some afternoon, if he will," cordially responded Nina. Both ladies were perfectly aware that Frederick Tregaskis would do nothing of the sort, and that there were few things less conducive to the cheering up of either than an encounter between him and Mrs. Severing. But they exchanged their fallacious hopes with an air of affectionately reassuring one another.

"I've one comfort," declared Bertie, "I'm hoping to see a very old friend of mine in town: Sybil Argent. I believe she and her son are there for a few weeks."

"Didn't she become a Catholic?" asked Nina, with a sudden air of intense interest, which provoked Bertha to a display of extreme nonchalance instantly.

"Let me see—did she? Oh yes. I believe she *has* become a Roman. Silly woman! Got under the influence of some priest or other, I fancy. She was never over-wise, though a dear, sweet thing."

"There is a wisdom which is not of this world," said Nina, upraising her eyes, and with an air of quotation.

Bertha laughed heartily.

"My dear Nina! It's really too funny to hear you quoting Scripture. Or is it only some mystical poet of the new set? Anyhow, poor Sybil Argent has been a Romanist for some years now, I fancy, and of course one wouldn't say anything about it, though I quite expect to have it all poured out to me—my friends have

the quaintest knack of confiding in me. I rather fancy I know more secrets than most people."

"That comes of always having your eyes and ears open," declared Nina with playful sweetness, "instead of keeping your head in the clouds, as I'm afraid mine too often is."

"I shall have to tell you not to get the stares, as I do the children when they sit gaping at vacancy," pleasantly replied her friend, and took her departure under this agreeable analogy.

"Poor dear Nina's affectation of mysticism is really too absurd," she told herself, and added quite illogically: "No wonder Francie is infected by it. It will be a comfort to talk to a rational woman again—which I suppose Sybil still is, in spite of having allowed herself to be bitten by the Romanist craze."

But Mrs. Tregaskis was not destined to probe the measure of her friend's rationality. Lady Argent had already left London when she arrived, and she was obliged to be content with inviting Ludovic Argent to dinner.

"Can you remember him, Rosamund?" she inquired with kindly interest.

"Of course," curtly retorted her ward, with the offended intonation which implied that Cousin Bertie had forgotten the number of Rosamund's years.

"We weren't so very little when we went over to Lady Argent's," apologetically said Frances. "I was nine, and I can remember her and the son quite well."

"Of course," said her guardian. "I wonder if he will have forgotten you."

Ludovic had not forgotten Rosamund and Frances. He looked forward curiously to seeing what the years had made of the little girl whom he had found crouching outside the door of the library.

His first impression was of pleasure at her undeniable beauty, and he was glad to find himself placed between her and Mrs. Tregaskis at dinner. Frances and a couple of negligible young men completed the party.

The whole-hearted virility of Mrs. Tregaskis dominated the conversation, which at first was general, but Ludovic

noted with a certain surprise that she no longer provoked in him anything but a detached amusement. That it was far otherwise with Rosamund he felt convinced. There was latent hostility in her every glance and gesture, and she diffused an atmosphere of discontent that affected Ludovic strangely.

"She gives one a sense of unrest," he reflected disappointedly. "The little sister, now, though she, too, is self-centred, has stability and a certain amount of poise. But Rosamund is unbalanced." He tried to translate the impression into physical terms. "It's as though the chemical ingredients in a retort had been carelessly flung together, regardless of power or proportion, and the solution in consequence is a mere seething chaos—fine material wasted. But what a fool I am—she can't be more than twenty. The solution is still to come."

They talked about books, and he saw her grey eyes light up with eagerness. When she became impersonal she seemed to him wholly charming.

"It is her relation to humanity that is at fault," reflected the psychologist.

"You have never been back to the Wye Valley since you were a child, have you?" he asked her.

"No," she said briefly, and added with a candid impulse of unreserve, "I don't want to go back there until I go back for good. The cottage is ours, you know, and one day Françoise and I will go back there to live."

"Is that your ideal?" he asked gently.

"Yes," she answered, in the tone of one who seeks to convince herself.

Ludovic found himself wondering whether it was also the ideal of Frances. There was something which struck him as remote, almost austere, in her young personality, and it was almost with the sense of a presentiment confirmed that he heard from Bertha Tregaskis, later in the evening, of the disquieting tendencies of her ward.

"She's a dear little kiddie," were the words, striking Ludovic as singularly inappropriate, which prefaced the recital of Bertha's perplexities, "but this religious phase is very tiresome. One knows that all young things go

through it, like measles, but this seems to be a particularly violent attack."

"Would there be any very vital objection to her joining the Roman Catholic Church?"

Bertha hesitated.

"No-o—only on general principles. I believe her mother was a Roman Catholic, as far as baptism went, but Dick was quite firm about having the children brought up in his own faith, and I don't fancy poor Rose cared either way. The children knew precious little when they came to me, but of course they learnt their catechism and all the rest of it with my Hazel. I believe in giving children a thoroughly orthodox grounding, at all events. Frances was always more inclined to be 'pi,' as my schoolboy friends call it, than either of the other two."

"Temperamentally religious?"

"Yes, I suppose so. That's generally the sort that suffers from the worst reaction. Poor mite, she told me quite gravely that she needed an intellectual discipline."

"I have seldom heard a better reason for joining the Church of Rome," said Ludovic gravely.

"She's picked up the phrase from some book, I suppose. Poor little thing! It makes one smile, and at the same time sigh, to hear anything so very, very young. One went through it all oneself so many years ago, and eventually came back to just the old way of thinking—as one's parents before one. But I'm talking as though you were a contemporary," said Bertha laughing, "and forgetting that you belong to the younger generation yourself."

Ludovic became aware that this forgetfulness implied a compliment. He tried to appear gratified, but was no longer young enough to feel so in reality.

"I am at all events able to sympathize with Miss Frances in her outlook," he said slowly. "I do not like what I know of the Catholic religion, but it would give her the discipline she craves."

"I dare say, but as I told her, it's much easier to be obedient to anyone and everything, sooner than to those to whom obedience is due," said Bertha smartly. "If she is so anxious to submit her own judgment, she can

submit it to mine. But that, of course, is exactly what my young lady doesn't choose to do." There was an acerbity in her tone that struck Ludovic as over-personal.

"If she really wishes it, I suppose you would not oppose it a little later on?" he suggested.

"I suppose not," said Bertha wearily. "I've never been hide-bound by any creed myself. One learns to be extraordinarily tolerant, as times goes on. Fresh air, laughter, sunshine, plenty of work and plenty of friends—that's my religion."

Ludovic had met this breezy, simple creed before, and it had always failed oddly to carry any conviction to him. It failed again now.

"Yes," he said slowly. "You know my mother became a Catholic some years ago?"

"Yes—she wrote to me. It seems to have made her very happy."

"I think it has," said Ludovic simply. Thereafter their talk turned upon Lady Argent and the Wye Valley.

It was, however, directly attributable to the foregoing conversation that Mrs. Tregaskis shortly after her return to Porthlew received an invitation for Frances.

"Do let Frances come to me for a nice long visit," wrote Lady Argent; "and Rosamund, too, if she likes, but Ludovic thinks that perhaps she would not care to be so near her old home. But I should love to have either, or both, and if Frances is really thinking of adopting her mother's religion, it seems only fair that she should see something of a Catholic atmosphere. I will not let her do anything rash, dear Bertie, and I am sure it will be a real rest for you to have no young things on your hands for a little while."

"It would indeed!" quoth Bertha, rather grimly, as she imparted portions of her correspondence to Frederick, who was rather ostentatiously not listening.

"After all, the best way to get the whole thing out of her head is to treat it as a matter of course. A persecution would only make her more determined to be a little martyr—Frederick, are you listening to me?"

"I am reading—or endeavouring to read—my evening paper," replied Frederick with unvarnished candour.

Mrs. Tregaskis had recourse to a stratagem by which she was frequently obliged to compel her husband's attention.

She addressed her next remark, in a mysteriously lowered voice, exclusively to the attentive Miss Blandflower.

"The fact is, Minnie, that the child fancies there is more difference between the English Church and the Roman one than there is. She is very ignorant, and so imagines a great deal. If she saw rather more of Romanism, I fancy it would be a case of either kill or cure."

"You mean," returned Miss Blandflower acutely, "that she would either want to become a Roman Catholic at once, or else see through the whole thing and give up the idea altogether."

"Exactly—probably the latter. There's nothing in the Roman Catholic religion, once you get over the preliminary glamour."

"To be or not to be," said Minnie with thoughtful irrelevance.

"With the exceptions of the Pope, and the worship of the Virgin Mary, they have nothing that we haven't got—Frances can be as High Church as she pleases."

"Not in *my* house," said Frederick unexpectedly.

"Why not, dear? It's a great deal better than turning Roman Catholic outright."

"You've just said that it came to exactly the same thing."

Bertha looked rather nonplussed for an instant, but recovered herself by exchanging a glance of good-humoured intelligence with Minnie, expressing very distinctly, "How like a man!"

"Anyhow, Frederick," she returned in soothing accents, "it will probably all end in smoke. That's my object in letting her go to Sybil for a bit. She will see that there's nothing in it, so to speak."

"An aching void," was Minnie's further contribution to the discussion.

Frederick retired behind his paper again.

"What a rest it would be to you if you could have the house to yourself for a bit!" said Miss Blandflower, looking fondly at Bertha.

"Well, I own that it would. This last year has been a trying one, for various reasons."

Miss Blandflower, who knew as well as Bertha herself that these various reasons were all embodied in Mrs. Tregaskis's only daughter, preserved a discreet silence.

"Well! that's that," was Bertha's summing up. "I'll see what the girls say. No doubt Rosamund will raise difficulties, poor child"—she laughed a little—"I've never yet known her fall in with any plan one suggested."

"She's very contrary," sighed Minnie, shaking her head.

Their forebodings proved to be well-founded. Rosamund did not wish to accept Lady Argent's invitation.

"I'm not going to ask her *why*," said Bertha exasperatedly, "I know too well that that's exactly what she wants—tiresome child! No, Minnie, I'd rather you didn't discuss it with her. The whole thing is pose, 'pour faire s'occuper d'elle,' and the less notice one takes of her the sooner she may get over this silly phase of always wanting to differ from everybody else."

"Couldn't I point out to her that it might give you something of a rest if they were both away for a little while?" asked Minnie mournfully.

"I'd really rather you didn't, dear old Minnie. I know how nicely you'd put it," said Bertha untruthfully, "but I don't want to give her any excuses for trumping up a grievance—thinking one wanted to get rid of her, or anything of that sort. Oh no, my dear—I shall jog along all right. There's plenty of life in the old dog yet!"

"There's no rest for the wicked," groaned Miss Blandflower, with no uncomplimentary intent.

"Not this side of the grave," agreed Bertha cheerfully. "But—well, I will own to you, Minnie, that I sometimes wish those two were rather more like other people. It seems so extraordinary that they can't lead the normal lives of ordinary girls—but one of them must take a week's silly flirtation as though it were a tragedy, and the other gives me no rest because she wants 'the intellectual discipline of the Catholic Church'!"

She laughed as she spoke, but Minnie exclaimed almost tearfully:



"Dear Mrs. Tregaskis, it does seem hard, when you've been so unutterably good to them. If only they'd been your own daughters they would have turned out very differently, I feel sure."

This rather infelicitous example drove Mrs. Tregaskis silently from the room.

A week later saw Frances' departure from Porthlew.

"I wish you were coming too, Rosamund," she said, unaware how cordially her guardian was endorsing the wish.

Rosamund said: "Write and tell me all about everything. Good-bye, darling."

Not even to her sister would she admit the mixture of defiance and sentimentality which had prompted her refusal to visit the Wye Valley.

"Not until I go there for good," she told herself dreamily.

It was the expression of a perfectly unconscious egotism.

# X

FRANCES and her hosts found themselves in perfect harmony. It did not occur to Frances that the eight years which had transformed her from a child to a young girl had changed Lady Argent a great deal more. Discursive she had always been, but her talk had now become almost wandering, and her always gentle volubility had increased surprisingly. The amusement, tempered by slight dismay, with which Ludovic listened to his parent's verbal flights, was quite unshared by Frances. Lady Argent talked about the Catholic Church, about which Frances wanted to learn all that she could, and each was serenely content.

"I haven't any scruples, dear, about telling you all that you want to know," Lady Argent unnecessarily informed her guest, "because dear Bertie is so broad-minded and honest herself that I know she wouldn't mind. And it seems only fair to counteract all those dreadful years that you've spent with Protestants, poor child, who have such very strange ideas about the Faith. Like Indulgences, you know—so terribly misunderstood, I always think—paid permission to commit sin for a hundred days, I've even heard people suggest—ignorant Protestants, you know."

"They are not all as ignorant as that," justice compelled Frances to observe.

"I never can remember that you are still a Protestant, poor child. You don't mind being called so, I hope?"

Frances was much too embarrassed to reply, but fortunately Lady Argent did not wait for a disclaimer.

"To think that I once held those shocking notions myself, dear. I really can hardly believe it now."

"How long is it since you became a Catholic?"

"Six years, dear child. It all seems like a dream—the time before one had the Faith, you know. It all

happened in such a wonderful way. I was staying at the seaside with a poor old Catholic aunt of mine who was dying, and she had a great friend who was a nun in a convent there. So she used to ask me to go and give this old nun news of her from time to time, and I went. Mother Serafina her name was, and I always think it's such a beautiful name, though I dare say that's just ~~association~~, since, of course, one couldn't exactly call one's daughter Serafina, and in any case I don't think nuns are allowed to be godmothers even if one asked her to—— Where was I, dear?"

"You were telling me how you went to the convent to give the nun news of your aunt."

"Oh yes, and the little parlour was so dreadfully bare and cold, *as it seemed to me then*," mysteriously interpolated Lady Argent as though some concealed source of heat in the little fireless room had since been revealed to her; "but there she sat, always smiling away, and that great brown rosary at her side. So sympathetic always, and the whole community praying every day for my poor aunt; and I remember one day she told me that she would pray every day for me, too, because of the anxiety and everything, you know, dear. So charitable and broadminded, I always think, because I hadn't any idea of being a Catholic at all then. But the Church always prays for those outside the Fold in the most touching way."

"I always like when we say the prayer for Jews and Roman Catholics, once a year," said Frances thoughtfully.

Lady Argent flushed in a most agitated way.

"Pray don't talk of it, my dear. It makes me very angry indeed. The idea of their praying for us as heretics! and calling us *Roman Catholics*, too! Such impertinence, I always think."

Frances wisely forbore to say anything further. "Tell me some more about Mother Serafina," she pacifically suggested.

"Well, dear, I went to see her very frequently, and quite as much for my own sake as for poor Aunt Charlotte's, who was quite past understanding things by that

time—a sort of senile paralysis the doctor said it was, though I think myself it was only second childhood, as they call it; and of course she was very weak, and sinking a little every day. Nothing but beef-ten and milk, dear, and her rosary always in her hand, though I'm sure she couldn't say a bead. She was a most devout Catholic, and the priest used to come and see her every day—and I remember I couldn't bear him, which shows what a dreadful thing prejudice is. He was an Irishman, and very stout—I remember the stairs were such a trial to him—and really I could hardly understand a word he said, he spoke with such a brogue. I am afraid," said Lady Argent with unutterable melancholy, "that I was far from looking upon him as I should have done, with the reverence due to a priest. He always used snuff, which seemed to me such a disgusting habit, and his hair wanted cutting so dreadfully. I am afraid I was most dreadfully narrow-minded about him, and I'm sure he was a very holy man."

"It was a pity he was—untidy," said Frances delicately.

"Yes, dear, but one is specially taught by the Church not to make rash judgments. I dare say I missed many graces by not talking to poor old Father O'Leary.

"However, poor Aunt Charlotte died, and I had to stay on after the funeral, sorting her things—such a collection, my dear! and I found so many references in her old letters and papers to my dear husband and myself, and wishing so much we might become Catholics. Not that dear Ludovic's father would ever have dreamed of such a thing, though, of course, God can do anything he pleases; but dear Fergus was a Scotchman, and if he had one prejudice stronger than any other, it was against Romanists, as he always called them. Of course, if the Lord had willed it . . ." said Lady Argent very doubtfully, and shaking her head at the memory of the late Sir Fergus Argent's determination, as opposed to Divine Omnipotence.

"But dear Fergus had been dead a long while, even then, and no doubt he views things very differently now. It's such a comfort to feel that he *must* thoroughly

approve, now, whereas if he'd been alive I'm very much afraid, dear, shocking though it is to say so, that he would have disliked my becoming a Catholic quite dreadfully—in fact, I really don't know what might have happened."

Lady Argent devoted a moment to the consideration of her spouse's probable attitude towards her adoption of the Catholic faith, and hastily abandoned the *tableau* thus conjured up with a slight shudder.

"God certainly knows what He is about, dear," she said thankfully.

"Did you go on seeing Mother Serafina at the Convent?"

"Oh yes. I had grown very fond of her by that time—and talked to her a great deal, and I shall never forget what a shock it was when I found I couldn't ask her to stay with me here. She told me the nuns had all made vows of perpetual enclosure, you know, dear, and couldn't move a yard out of the grounds except for the most serious reasons and with a dispensation from the Holy Father himself. And it wasn't at all like the sort of old convent gardens one reads about, with alleys and box-hedges and cedars and things, but quite a tiny little gravel court at the back of the house, and only a plane-tree in one corner. In fact, I don't know how all the community and the plane-tree and everything ever fitted into it at all, when they were out there for the midday recreation, though some of them did walk backwards, but I think that was only so as to see the Superior and hear what she was saying. But I'm sure they must all have bumped into the plane-tree a number of times. However, they all seemed very happy, and Mother Serafina always told me she had never known what happiness was until she became a nun."

"It must be wonderful," breathed Frances.

"Yes, dear, quite wonderful, but that's what the grace of a vocation is. Quite supernatural, I always think, to leave one's home and everything and live such a life—detachment, you know, dear."

"Of course," ventured Frances, "it must be rather sad for the father and mother of a nun—to let her go, I mean."

"Dreadful, my dear. But one would always feel so glad and thankful, though so dreadfully sorry—you know what I mean," lucidly returned Lady Argent. "I really don't know what one would do if one had a daughter a nun—say one's only child—though, of course, even as a girl, I can hardly imagine dear Ludovic a nun, but one never knows——" Lady Argent looked distractedly into the fire.

"Sometimes," she murmured, "I am afraid that I idolize Ludovic. I lie awake at night, you know, dear, wondering what I should do if he were ever to be burnt to death."

"But why should he be burnt to death?" said the literal Frances, fixing horrified eyes on her hostess.

"At the stake, you know, dear, just as so many martyrs have been, even in England—you know what Tyburn is, dear: so dreadful, I always think; and though one ought not to look upon any soul as being outside the pale of God's grace, that terrible Queen Elizabeth, with Mary Stuart's blood upon her head and everything—— So that if persecution *should* begin again—and, after all, dear, look at France, and all those poor good Dominicans turned out of their holy monastery—and if Ludovic was by that time a Catholic, as one prays and hopes, should I be able to let him go? Let alone being like the Mother of the Maccabees, though I always felt certain, even when I was a Protestant, that that was a sort of miracle, because one knows what one would feel about one, let alone seven—though really I dare say by the time those frightful tortures had begun on the youngest she had almost ceased to feel anything at all, except thankfulness that there were no more to come. But when I think how often I have wickedly rebelled at my poor Ludovic's being so lame——"

"Was he always?" gently inquired Frances.

"From the time he was a few weeks old, dear, and I've often thought that if I'd been a Catholic then, and put a pair of scapulars round my poor little darling's neck, the accident would never have happened."

On this melancholy reflection the door opened, and Lady Argent's poor little darling came into the room.

"Don't you want the lights, mother? It's nearly dark, and I've brought you the second post."

Ludovic turned on the light as he spoke, and gave a small packet of letters and newspapers into his mother's hands, shaking his head reproachfully as he did so.

She looked up guiltily.

"There's nothing much, darling—only a little magazine called *Beads*, and *The Catholic Fireside* and a few letters."

Ludovic laughed gently.

"And how many of those are begging letters, dear?"

Lady Argent looked through the little heap, appearing rather distraught.

"This is a receipt," she declared triumphantly, waving a sheet of cheap glazed notepaper closely covered with neat, angular writing.

"It's a very long one," said Ludovic suspiciously.

"Those poor French sisters at Coleham-on-Sea! The Superior has actually taken the trouble to write herself, and I only sent them the most dreadful old things: not clothes only, Francie, dear—though some of Ludovic's old vests, not fit to give to the poor people here—but hair-brushes without any bristles—and even that seems a mockery, since their hair is all cut off when they take their first vows, I believe—so unwise not to wait till the final ones, I always think, though no doubt the Church has her reasons; and books with half the leaves torn out; and even a dreadful little half-empty pot of rouge, which my maid actually put in though she never told me till afterwards. No, Ludovic, you really shouldn't laugh. I can't think where such a thing came from, for I've certainly never used it in my life, and I can't bear to think of the scandal it may have given those dear good Sisters of the Poor."

"Do they make any allusion to it?" asked Ludovic, with boyish amusement in his laughing eyes.

Lady Argent scanned the closely-written sheets.

"No, dear. 'Those good and useful gifts, such joy for our poor people'—that *can't* be the hair-brush, can it?—'we can never thank you enough for your generosity to us'—dear, dear, it does make one feel so dreadfully

mean. 'We shall have the wherewithal to decorate a Christmas-tree for our little ones'—Ludovic! they can't give the poor children my broken air-cushion or that torn mackintosh of yours—or the old dog-collar. 'You will certainly be rewarded for this great generosity and our poor prayers . . . ' Oh dear, dear, this is very touching," said poor Lady Argent, folding up her letter with an air of remorse.

"Perhaps they can get money by selling the things after they've mended them up," whispered Frances consolingly. Ludovic heard her, and looked at her very kindly, but he only said:

"Now, mother, tell me what your next correspondent means by putting 'Sag' in the corner of the envelope? Is it the same sort of thing as Mizpah or Swastika, or whatever the thing is that housemaids have on their brooches?"

"No, dear," said Lady Argent with an air of great reserve. "Quite different. It isn't 'Sag' at all."

Ludovic held out a corner of the envelope to Frances.

"I appeal to you. If that isn't 'Sag,' what is it?"

She looked, half-laughing, towards Lady Argent.

"Ludovic, dear, pray don't be so ridiculous. It's S.A.G., my dear boy, and stands for 'St. Anthony guide,' just to make sure the letter doesn't go astray. I don't say I put it on my own letters but it's a very pious little custom—and letters certainly *might* get lost, you know."

"I do not think that this one would have been any great loss," rather grimly replied her son. "It's a begging-letter, isn't it?"

Lady Argent took out sundry enclosures, glanced through them and exclaimed triumphantly:

"Not at all! In fact it's just the contrary. It's from those Sisters in Dublin, offering me tickets in their great charity lottery, and with a list of the prizes. It's really quite wonderful—a wonderful opportunity," repeated Lady Argent, with more wistfulness than conviction in her tone.

Ludovic took the badly typewritten strip of paper from her hand.

"A live pig, six months old. A harmonium in per-



fect repair. A table-centre for the parlour—I should certainly have a try for that, mother, it would improve the drawing-room; coloured statue of St. Joseph standing four feet high, etc., etc. Tickets sixpence, ninepence, or a shilling."

"It's to pay off the debt on their new church, dear," replied his mother. "You remember the account of the opening ceremony that I read you from *The Tablet* the other day? So very nice and edifying, but I'm afraid they spent rather more than they meant to. At any rate they are some eight hundred pounds in debt over it, I believe, and no doubt this charity bazaar is to clear some of it off."

"Raffles are illegal," quoth Ludovic severely, "and I don't think you should encourage them, mother. Please help me to persuade my mother that charity begins at home, Miss Frances."

The modern fashion by which any man becomes entitled to use the Christian name of any girl spending a week in his mother's house, failed altogether to commend itself to Ludovic Argent.

"The Canon is always in difficulties here, and would be very glad of money for some of the poor people."

"Oh, my dear," cried Lady Argent. "I am torn in two as you very well know, and the Canon has been a friend of ours for a number of years, but how can I encourage the spread of Protestantism?"

"You need not, darling. I don't care a bit about their spiritual welfare, only their temporal," coolly observed Ludovic, "and I've sent him a small cheque for the District Nursing Fund, from both of us."

"Oh, my dear boy, how can you say such a thing—he doesn't mean it, Frances—but I'm really very glad you've done it, and it will show the poor Canon that one isn't narrow-minded, and perhaps bring him to see things in another light." Lady Argent mused thoughtfully over the imaginary portrait, than which nothing could have appeared further from probability to an impartial observer, of a suddenly Catholicized Canon inspiring his flock with views similar to his own, and Ludovic glanced thoughtfully at Frances Grantham.

No hint of humour had disturbed the placid purity of her intent gaze while listening to Lady Argent and plying her with gentle questions. She was manifestly absorbed in the subject, and her natural reverence was in no way shocked or checked by demonstrations which Ludovic in his own mind could only qualify as absurd.

"She is a born mystic," he thought with a sudden conviction that was almost physical in its intensity, "the stuff to make an ideal lady-abbess. If she becomes a Catholic, I believe she will be a nun."

He felt vaguely compassionate at the idea, and said later to his mother:

"Wouldn't it be better to say rather less about religion to that little girl? She is very impressionable."

"That's just why I like talking to her, darling," returned Lady Argent ingenuously. "One feels that it is sowing seed in ground which is all ready for it."

Ludovic remained silent for a moment, pondering this excellent reason for the conversion of his mother's youthful guest.

"I love having her here," said his mother, "she is so sweet. I'm only afraid it's dull for her. Would she like her sister to come for a few days, or a friend?"

"Ask her."

Frances frankly disavowed any wish for companionship other than that of her hostess, but a few days later she said to Lady Argent: "Mrs. Severing is staying near here, at the Towers. I should like to see her, if I may. She has written me such a kind little note suggesting that I should go over there, and I am very fond of her."

"I know you are, my dear," kindly replied Lady Argent, who had heard many of Nina's spiritual upliftings from her admiring echo. "I should like you to see her, and I should like to meet her myself. But the fact is—it is a little awkward—I have never called on the people at the Towers."

"Who are they?" said Frances wonderingly.

"Sir Giles and Lady Cotton, dear. He is the original founder of Cotton and Sons—the big ironmongers in the City. That is really why—not the shop, dear, of course, but the shocking way they treated the poor dear Fathers."

I never could bear to go near them, and I had to give up the shop altogether, though I'd always dealt there for nearly twenty years. So I never called on Lady Cotton."

"What did they do to the Fathers?" asked Frances with a curiosity unspoilt by the previous recital of many similar outrages.

"Oh, my dear child, it was all about some garden seats that the Prior ordered for the grounds of their house at Twickenham—for visitors, you know, because they naturally have no time to sit on garden seats themselves, as you can imagine, however tired they may get with all that manual labour, and getting up at four o'clock in the morning and everything; and there seems to have been some terrible misunderstanding—with the shop-people, you know, dear, and whether the seats were on approval or not. Anyway, they got left out in the rain all one night, and the paint was spoilt, and the Prior sent them back and said they couldn't take them after all. But the shop-people were thoroughly unpleasant, and said the seats must be paid for just the same—most grasping and disagreeable, even though the letter of the law may have been on their side. I never quite understood the ins and outs of it all, but as the Prior, who was the most simple soul on earth—a Breton, dear, such a nice man—asked me himself: how they could tell whether they liked the benches or not until they had seen the effect of bad weather on them? Which sounds very reasonable indeed, but Cotton and Sons behaved quite shockingly, and even threatened to go to law about it. All very well for them, you know, dear—it would have been an advertisement in a way, but most unpleasant for the poor Fathers."

"What was the end of it?"

"They had to pay for the garden-seats, dear, and I never could sit on one with any pleasure, though they are strewn all over the garden at Twickenham. That is to say," said Lady Argent, colouring faintly, "it was—friends—who actually paid for them, but I never said much to Ludovic about them. To this day he does not know why I have left off going to Cotton and Sons."

Frances did not dare to make any further suggestion for a *rapprochement* between Lady Argent and the quondam proprietor of Cotton and Sons. She only looked wistfully and undecidedly at the letter in her hand.

"To be sure, my dear, I was forgetting about your friend. Of course, I do not suppose she has any idea of all this," said Lady Argent generously, "since it is not a story that tells well for Cottons, and I do not suppose Sir Giles cares to dwell upon it. I really cannot make up my mind to call upon them—in fact, after all this time I don't quite see how I could—but I shall be delighted if Mrs. Severing cares to come over any day next week. Ludovic could drive you over to fetch her in time for luncheon. Do write and suggest it, my dear."

"Thank you so much. I know you will like her, and she would love to see you and the garden—and the chapel," said Frances rather shyly. "You know she is thinking of becoming a Catholic."

"How very delightful. But what can she be waiting for, dear? She is a widow, and her son, you tell me, is quite a boy. No doubt she will bring him into the Church too, later on. By all means, Francie, ask her to come over on Friday, or whichever afternoon suits her best."

Frances wrote the invitation gladly.

She was curiously devoid of insight, and it did not occur to her that any two people of whom she was fond could fail to like and admire one another.

"Isn't Mrs. Severing the 'Nina Severing' who composes?" asked Ludovic, as he drove Frances to fetch her friend.

"Yes. Her music is my favourite modern music. Don't you like the 'Kismet' songs?"

"I once heard her play," said Ludovic, avoiding, clumsily, as he felt, a reply. "Her execution was very brilliant."

"Meretricious," was the adjective he had applied to the popular musician's talent, at the time.

Ludovic wished that the recollection had not occurred to him so opportunely.

## XI

**P**ERHAPS it was reaction from the materialistic atmosphere that undoubtedly prevailed at the modern and opulent mansion of Cotton that was responsible for the extreme spirituality which marked Mrs. Severing's conversation that Friday afternoon.

Her golden hair shone against darkly splendid furs, and her luminous gaze strayed continually to some far horizon and was continually recalled with a start that just contrived not to be imperceptible.

"It is too delightful to be in an atmosphere like this one," she murmured to Lady Argent in the hall, and bent over her plate at luncheon for a long moment with a reverence which far surpassed the gentle murmur in which her hostess indulged.

When curried eggs were succeeded by outlets Nina cast a gravely wondering look around her.

"Friday?" she murmured gently. "I wonder if I might ask—ah! I see you, too, fast on Fridays."

"Oh no," said Lady Argent gently, "I only abstain from meat—really no privation at all—I'm not very fond of meat, and it's so much better for one to have fish and eggs and vegetables and things, quite apart from what one always feels to be the cruelty of it, though I'm afraid one doesn't think about it very often, except just when one actually *sees* the lambs playing about in the fields, or the chickens being killed in that dreadfully cruel way, poor things."

"We should all be infinitely better physically and mentally if we only had one meal a day. Just," said Nina with poignant simplicity, "a little fruit or uncooked nuts, and a draught of water. I've always said that I should like to live as the old hermits did."

Frances was aware that Nina had always said so, and

wondered vaguely why she was for the first time rendered slightly uncomfortable by the aspiration.

"May I give you some fish, Mrs. Severing?" asked Ludovic matter-of-factly.

"Please do," she smiled. "I don't actually belong to your beautiful Faith, but I love to live up to all the dear old symbols."

"You couldn't call turbot a symbol, exactly," said Lady Argent rather doubtfully, "and I do hope you'll give Mrs. Severing a respectable slice, my dear boy, for she must be very hungry after such a long drive."

"No," said Nina, looking as though a breath would blow her away altogether. "No." Her smile repudiated the mere suggestion of hunger with a delicate completeness.

"I hear you have the most lovely little chapel," she said softly, turning to her hostess. "It would be a great pleasure to me to see it. What a boon one's little solitary corner for meditation is! Francie may have told you that I am rather a wanderer on the face of the earth, and so can appreciate it doubly."

Frances, who had always looked upon Mrs. Severing as the prosperous chatelaine of Pensevern and its adjoining acres, looked so naively astonished that Ludovic felt strongly inclined to laugh. Instead, however, he charitably engaged her in a long conversation which enabled Nina to carry out the skilled presentment of herself which she evidently had in mind, unhampered by the startled gaze of her earlier acquaintance.

"Ludovic had the chapel built for me, as a surprise while I was away once," Lady Argent told her proudly. "So very dear and kind of him, and I shall never forget my astonishment, especially as I thought at first that it was a new bathroom. Not when I went inside, you know, but we'd talked about having one for a long time, and when I saw the remains of the workmen outside, I felt sure it must be that. Ladders and tools and things, you know, and a great bucket of whitewash, such as one naturally associates with a bathroom, especially if one has it already in one's mind, you know. But that was just because Ludovic thought it would make it lighter."

"White walls," murmured Nina symbolically. "I do so agree. Do you hold your own little services there?"

"The Bishop most kindly lets his own chaplain come over twice a week and say Mass. You see, the nearest Catholic Church is some miles away, and going in early isn't always possible, although I can always manage Sundays, but of course it's the greatest possible blessing to have the Chaplain. Such a nice man—and not an Irishman," said Lady Argent rather thankfully.

"I'm afraid my prejudices are rather against parsons of any denomination," Nina said with the air of one making a candid admission. "I always fancy—perhaps it's just a fancy peculiar to myself—that one is so much more easily in tune with the Infinite, without any human intervention. But then I'm afraid I'm a dreadfully individual person."

"Of course," said Lady Argent quietly, "a Catholic looks at that quite differently."

"Ah, but don't speak as though I were not one of you in heart, in mind," cried Nina quickly. "I adore the Catholic Church, and when I go to Church in London, I always go to Farm Street or one of your places of worship. I always say that there is an *atmosphere* in a Catholic Church which one finds nowhere else."

Ludovic caught the words and glanced hastily at his mother, aware that this well-worn sentiment is as a red rag to a bull to the devout Catholic. For the remainder of the meal he firmly directed and maintained the conversation in undenominational channels.

But after luncheon was over and Nina had smoked two cigarettes, with an air of detachment that made the act seem almost saintly, Ludovic left Lady Argent and Frances to entertain their guest unaided.

"Talk to me," said Nina gently, turning her enormous eyes on her hostess, "talk to me a little of your wonderful Faith. I have heard so much of you—and of it—from my little Francie, and I feel she must have told you that I, too, am a seeker after truth; things of this world mean so little—oh, so little!—in comparison with the eternal quest."

Receiving no immediate response but the slight be-

wilderness slowly becoming apparent on Lady Argent's face, Nina glided on her conversational way with much discretion:

"Such things are not to be talked about, are they? They go too deep. One understands. My own reserve has always been rather a proverb; but somehow in this sort of atmosphere—well, it's deep calling to deep, isn't it, rather?"

She laughed a very little, with a perceptible undercurrent of agitation.

"You'll let me talk to you quite frankly, won't you?" she asked, with an appealing look at Lady Argent. "It's so seldom one has the impulse—and my life has been a very lonely one. Oh, I have my boy, of course—but, then, what does the younger generation give? Nothing. They can give us nothing—in the nature of things. It's all taking on their side, and sacrifice on ours. One would hardly have it otherwise—but— Little Frances knows that I don't mean her—she is my little comfort." Nina tendered a reassuring, if rather absent-minded, hand to her little comfort, who received it rather perfunctorily, and released it a good deal sooner than its owner expected.

"My son has always been a companion to me since he was a child," said Lady Argent firmly; "and as for sacrifices, I've always felt them to be on his side, if there were any, since he might have been so much more in touch with things, living in London—he writes, you know—only my tiresome asthma is so troublesome there, and he won't hear of leaving me. Not that it is a sacrifice, since he would much rather be with me here, than without me anywhere else," she concluded simply.

"How very, very wonderful and beautiful such a relationship is," breathed Nina reverently. "Morris and I are all the world to one another, but he is very, very young—young for his age, as well—and perhaps the very young shrink a little from an atmosphere of sadness. You see I have been all alone for a number of years now. I married very, very young—a child—and then I was left, with—"

Before Nina had reached the looming allusion to a



child with only a star to guide her, Frances rose quickly and glided from the room, rather to the relief of Mrs. Severing, who was becoming increasingly aware of her protégée's startled eyes at various new aspects of a recital which she had supposed she knew by heart.

"That is a very pure, sweet little soul," said Nina as the door shut, after the invariable rule which causes minds of a certain calibre instantly to adopt as subject of conversation whoever has most recently left the room.

The custom not being one which recommended itself to Lady Argent, she merely replied with a vague, kind murmur indicative of goodwill, but of nothing else.

"One does so dislike the idea of discussing *les absents*," said the responsive Nina, with an atrocious accent of which she was sufficiently conscious to make her slur the words over rather rapidly, "but I have somehow felt that perhaps between us we could find out what it is that the child really needs. I don't know that beloved Bertha Tregaskis altogether understands her, though I wouldn't say so for the world."

"Bertie has been very good to them both," said Lady Argent loyally. "So wonderful of her, I always think, and all that dairy work and the Mothers' Union and everything as well—simply marvellous."

"Indeed, yes," cried Nina, "quite the most practical woman I know, and my dearest friend in the world. Attraction of opposites, I suppose. I always think that she and I are the two types—Martha and Mary—active and contemplative, you know."

Lady Argent, to whom Nina's favourite *mot* was naturally new, looked more than a little doubtful.

"Dear Bertie is very wonderful altogether," she murmured. "Her insight and sympathy, you know, and then her humility—it's really quite touching to hear her blame or ridicule herself, when one is so full of admiration—all her gifts, you know, intellectual as well as practical."

"Ah, those clever dialect imitations!" cried Nina, with an enthusiasm that strove subtly to confine Bertha's mental attainments to dialect imitations. "She's so original, isn't she? And at one time she used to scribble

a little, you know—just trifles for the magazines, but quite clever. I remember going through one or two of the proof-sheets for her—Bertie is always so ridiculously determined to think that I can write myself, you know, and wanted me to polish up some of her descriptions of travel—not, of course, that I'm really much good, though I've always thought I should like to write, if I could find the time."

"Music, of course, has taken up most of your time."

"Ah yes—my art. It's been everything, of course."

"It would be the greatest possible pleasure if you would play to us a little this afternoon. Ludovic loves music, and really knows a great deal about it," said Lady Argent, believing herself to be stating a fact.

"One can always play to a true lover of music," murmured Nina. "I often feel that with little Francis—child though she is."

"Mrs. Grantiam was so very musical, poor thing!" ejaculated Lady Argent, who would have felt it almost an irreverence to omit the epithet in the case of one deceased. "It is a pity the girls have not inherited her gift. They neither of them play, do they, or is Rosamund musical?"

"Not in the very least," replied Nina, who rather disliked Rosamund. "She does not know the meaning of the word. Between ourselves, dear Lady Argent, Rosamund is not a very taking sort of girl, although she's prettier than Frances—in fact," she added, with the easy generosity of an extremely and maturely attractive woman, "she is quite unusually pretty. But that's all."

"I thought she was clever."

Nina shrugged her shoulders.

"It's not the sort of cleverness that attracts," she said shrewdly. "Hazel Tregaskis, before she married, had twice the success that Rosamund had. Now, of course, with money and clothes and things, and that romantic story about her marriage, Hazel is too popular for words, though she's really not pretty in the least—only very bright and attractive."

Lady Argent, who did not think that Hazel Tregaskis's

marriage with Sir Guy Marleswood was a sufficiently reputable subject to be mentioned, except to the Almighty, with whom she occasionally pleaded piously for the first Lady Marleswood's demise, maintained a rather weighty silence.

Nina rippled lightly through it.

"Rosamund is rather the sort of girl who likes to go about looking like a tragedy-queen, and for no particular reason, you know. There was a very foolish and youthful love affair," said Nina with an air of extreme detachment, "which only lasted about a week, and meant nothing at all, but she has quite got over that—so that her air of having a grievance is really affectation. You know anything which fails to ring quite true does jar so—one feels it instinctively—in a moment. Don't you agree?"

Lady Argent looked as though she were torn between truth and an unaccountable desire to contradict her visitor, and it was a slight but distinct relief to them both when Ludovic came into the room.

"Are you going to be kind enough to let us hear you play, Mrs. Severing?" he asked her. "The piano is an Erard, and though it is not new, I should very much like you to try it, if you will."

"Do," said Lady Argent cordially.

Ludovic wondered whether the cordiality sprang from a certain weariness which he thought that he could detect in his parent's expression. It seemed to him that one might weary rather speedily in Mrs. Severing's company. But when she was seated before the Erard, a load of rings removed from her white supple fingers, and the sound of one of her own "Preludes" filling the room, Ludovic felt inclined to change his mind.

Nina Severing at the piano interested him. He felt that "meretricious" was still the word that he would apply to her talent, but her rendering of her own inspirations struck him as an odd bit of self-revelation.

The "Prelude" was a rapid, highly-technical *tour-de-force* of muscular agility, with the merest and most disconnected thread of melody possible in the treble, and in syncopated time. Ludovic divined that Nina

regarded it as her masterpiece. She played with great self-confidence and an amount of force that was rather surprising.

Afterwards, at Lady Argent's request, she played a Chopin Polonaise and the too well-known Minute-Waltz. Her rendering of neither satisfied Ludovic's taste, but he listened with an interest that was almost profound.

"She is only sincere when she is dealing with her own compositions," was his final verdict. "As an interpreter she fails altogether. She does not attempt to give us Chopin's Chopin, but Nina Severing's Chopin—the Chopin of the author of the 'Kismet' songs. And so the polonaise becomes trivial, almost a little vulgar—it is utterly above and beyond her personality." He gave himself up to interested musings, and listened to Nina's subsequent performances with his outward ear only.

But Frances and Lady Argent gave the popular musician her full meed of applause and congratulation.

"How you can ever have time to practise all those things, and learn them by heart, I can't imagine," said Lady Argent admiringly. "When I think what difficulty I had as a girl in memorizing a very pretty thing called 'The Maiden's Prayer,' which I believe is quite out of date nowadays—but then I was never considered particularly musical. Ludovic gets it all from his father."

"Celtic blood," said Nina, pronouncing the *C* as though it had been *S*. "No—memorizing has never been of much difficulty to me. Things just seem to *come*, you know. As a child I used to spend hours and hours in an old organ-loft, just playing to myself, you know—always alone, but never lonely so long as I could make music." Her eyes deepened and grew introspective over this pathetic sketch, which happened to be a fancy one, and it was with a perceptible effort that she presently shook off her slight appearance of absorption and once more begged to be shown the chapel.

"Frances will take you, and show you all that there is to be seen. I know you will forgive me for not undertaking the stairs oftener than I can help," said her hostess with a little hesitation.

"But of course!"

Nina followed her guide with a graceful gesture expressive of complete understanding.

"Ludovic!" cried Lady Argent in a distraught manner, as soon as he had carefully closed the door. "I am afraid it was really very wrong of me to tell such a shocking untruth, though I did not say in so many words that it would bring on my asthma if I went upstairs to the chapel, but I am sure that is what she understood me to mean, and the worst of it is that I *meant* her to take it that way, and that is really just the same thing as telling a downright lie. Because of course stairs never affect me in the least, as you very well know, only damp, which the chapel is far from being, especially with that dear little radiator put in under Our Lady's statue. Oh, my dear boy, do you think it was very wrong of me?"

"Not in the least. Why should you have taken her to the chapel yourself, tiresome woman that she is?"

"Oh, hush," said his mother, looking delighted. "Pray don't call her names, Ludovic, my dear, it really is most uncharitable. But I am dreadfully afraid that I have taken a terrible dislike to her."

"What! When she is so much interested in Catholicism?" asked Ludovic, with a shade of derision in his tone.

"I did not like her manner about the Church at all," said Lady Argent with melancholy emphasis. "I really did *not*, Ludovic. I have no doubt that it is very uncharitable of me, but it positively struck me once or twice that she was almost posing about it all. So unlike dear little Frances, who is so much in earnest."

"I believe it was Mrs. Severing who first put the idea of Catholicism into her head, all the same," said Ludovic rather maliciously.

"My dear boy, how can you say such a thing! It was the grace of God, neither more nor less, and when you consider that Mrs. Grantham was a Catholic herself, by birth!—though I'm sure I had no idea of such a thing till just the other day: but then one was so dreadfully apt to look upon all foreigners as belonging to some odd fancy religion, or even nothing at all, in those days. And, of course, poor thing, she must have given up her

religion altogether, or those children would never have been baptized Protestants, poor little things, when you think of the promises the non-Catholic party to a marriage always has to make—but I suppose Mr. Grantham was never even told about them, let alone asked to make them."

"Probably not," agreed her son placidly.

"Dreadful to think of! And so poor Mrs. Grantham died without the Last Sacraments or anything at all. If one had only known in those days! However," said Lady Argent, wisely putting the past away from her, "God has His own ways of doing things, and I have no doubt that Frances is His chosen instrument for many things—perhaps she may even bring dear Bertie herself into the Church, one of these days."

"And Mrs. Severing, mother?"

"Ludovic! I can't bear to think of that woman's first Confession. I can see her, keeping the poor priest for hours in the confessional, while she forced all her fancies down his throat," said Lady Argent, with the energy that only a really good woman can put into denunciation.

"Mother!"

"Well, my dear boy, I dare say it is very wrong of me to say so, and if I am giving you scandal I am sorry for it. You know very well that I would never say such a thing before the servants or anybody, though what Charles must have thought of her at luncheon, calling the turbot symbolical and everything, I really don't know. She will have to have tea before driving all that way back, but pray ring the bell and let me order it half an hour earlier."

This inhospitable manœuvre had hardly been put into execution before Frances and Nina reappeared. The latter laid her slender, gloveless hand for a moment on Lady Argent's sleeve, the blackness of which formed an admirable foil to extreme whiteness and the flash of diamonds, and said in tones which almost suggested an emotional *tremolo*:

"I can't thank you enough. It's been a revelation—*Coram sanctissimum!*"

Ludovic, with some perspicacity, divined that Mrs. Severing supposed her fragment of Latin to be some recondite version of "*sanctum sanctorum*," and tried to look proportionately gratified, the more so as his mother's expression denoted considerable distrust mingled with a most perfunctory politeness.

"I'm so glad," she murmured doubtfully. "Do pray let me give you some tea—they are just bringing it."

"The little shrine!" said Nina with a sort of soft rapture. "It reminded me so much of those little wayside shrines one saw everywhere in Italy. I have always loved them."

"Do you know Italy well?" asked Ludovic.

"I was there years ago—with my husband. I remember," said Nina determinedly turning to Lady Argent, "that we had a private audience with the Pope—so interesting, and he was the dearest old man. I shall never forget kneeling there—I was a mere child, I married very, very young—to receive his blessing, and how impressive it all was. He gave me some beads, too, that I am sure have all sorts of beautiful Indulgences attached to them, even for a poor little heretic. Frances knows them—they always hang over my bed at home. I really could hardly sleep without them."

Even Frances felt no regret when Mrs. Severing took her departure.

Neither she nor Lady Argent alluded to the visit that evening, and Ludovic, on his return from conducting Nina to the Towers, spent the evening in reading aloud an article on French literature.

But when his mother rose to go to bed, and he handed her the small heap of miscellanies without which she seldom moved, she looked almost coldly at the polished brown rosary that crowned the little pile.

"Thank you, my dear boy," she said rather faintly, taking them from him, and added, as soon as Frances was out of earshot, "I assure you that that absurd woman has really almost put me off saying my rosary for the evening."

## XII

WHATEVER Lady Argent's strictures on the length of time that Mrs. Severing might entertain a hypothetical director in the confessional, she did not herself hesitate to inflict upon the Prior at Twickenham an epistle which covered the better part of six pages.

Ludovic watched his mother's pen hurrying over her paper with an uneasy sense of knowing what she was about, and presently asked her gently:

"Mother dear, you won't try and persuade Mrs. Tregaskis into allowing that little girl to do anything in a hurry, will you?"

"Not for the world, dear," said Lady Argent, colouring guiltily. "I quite see what you mean—it would seem very interfering, and besides, I do not think it would move Bertie in the least. She is much cleverer than I am, and would not dream of asking my advice, far less of taking it. But I am just sending a few lines to Father Anselm, on a—a little matter of conscience, dear."

Ludovic knew the peculiar expression of self-conscious guilt which meant that his mother was embarked upon some pious course of which she felt certain that her son would disapprove, and was far from reassured by this simple explanation.

Lady Argent's mysteries were so transparent, however, that he felt confident of a speedy enlightenment, but a few days later she announced that she thought of making a few days stay in London and of taking Frances with her.

"But why, dear? You know London never suits you. Is it really necessary?"

"My teeth really do need attention, Ludovic," faltered his mother with an intonation which betrayed plainly that—however much her teeth might require attention



they were not solely responsible for her sudden resolution, even if she had not immediately added in conscience-stricken accents:

"Not that I want you to think it is only my teeth, though I have made an appointment with Mr. Fanshawe, because it seemed such waste not to go there when one was actually in London, but I do rather want to do one or two other things besides."

Ludovic perceived that his mother did not wish him to have a more intimate knowledge of the one or two other things, for which he felt sure that the singular number would have sufficed, and forbore to inquire further.

She took Frances to London the following week, and from there wrote to her son:

"We went to Twickenham for the day on Sunday, as Frances was most anxious to see the monastery, and I could not help longing that she should know Father Anselm. I left them to have a little talk together while I paid my visit to the chapel, and the dear child was so very much pleased with all he said to her."

Lady Argent, like the majority of women, was always at her most valiant on paper, and Ludovic rightly conjectured that she hoped thus to render further allusion to the Twickenham visit unnecessary. It was therefore not without some amusement, on the evening that she and Frances returned, that Ludovic listened to the conversational manoeuvres by which his mother strove to forestall any inconvenient inquiries.

"And what about Twickenham, dear?" he firmly inquired.

"Oh, my dear boy, it was the most freezing day you can imagine—that very cold Sunday—and altogether so unlike what one always associated with Twickenham—Twickenham Ferry, you know, though it's a song one never hears nowadays—such a pity, I always think. It makes one think of straw bonnets and crinolines and so many delightful things of that kind, which one never meets with now—not that I can remember crinolines myself."

"I suppose not, dear, but I want to hear about the monastery," said Ludovic inexorably. "What did you think of the Prior, Miss Frances?"

"I liked him very much. I never saw a monk before, and he was so much more human and cheerful than I had expected, somehow."

"It would not be at all surprising if they were the most melancholy creatures on earth," Lady Argent agitatedly broke in, "at least from a human point of view, because, of course, want of food and sleep are most dreadfully trying, and they never have enough of either."

Frances sat with an awestricken expression in her eyes.

"It's extraordinary to realize that that sort of thing actually goes on now, at the same time as one's own ordinary everyday life," she said slowly. "I never knew before that it—religious life, I mean—went on, in that sort of way, in England nowadays. It always seemed, somehow, so remote—belonging to medieval times."

"Like the Inquisition, etc.," unkindly remarked Ludovic, with a glance at his mother, whom the allusion always roused to eloquence.

"That was only a political institution, dear, as you very well know, and had nothing to do with the Church—at least the worst part of it hadn't, and naturally *autres temps autres mœurs*, and, besides, it was in Spain, which I never think is quite the same as other countries, in spite of having kept the Faith in that marvellous way all these years, which I believe is the reason they have no days of abstinence there, but look at the bull-fights and things. Their ideas must be different to ours, I feel certain."

"Very different indeed," dryly remarked Ludovic. "But please go on about Twickenham. Did you spend the whole day there?"

"Yes," said the unconscious Frances. "They gave us lunch and tea in the guest-house, and showed us all over the grounds, and we stayed to Benediction in the evening. It was so nice."

"Such good music, my dear boy," said Lady Argent in a pleading tone of extenuation.

Ludovic refused to attribute the visit to any music, good or otherwise, but he said no more until he found

himself alone with his mother, who faced him with a mixture of deprecation and resoluteness in her gaze.

"I know you don't approve, darling," she said bravely, "but the fact was that that poor little dear really *requires* some spiritual direction, and I had already written to Father Anselm about her, and he was so very anxious that I should put her into the way of being taught something about the Faith, that it really seemed one's duty. You see she will be dreadfully cut off from everything when she gets back to Porthlew."

"And what is the Prior going to do? Lend her books?" said Ludovic, with a most unenthusiastic intonation, and a vivid recollection of the innumerable devotional manuals of suggestive titles that were strewn about his mother's bedroom and boudoir.

"Yes, dear," meekly returned Lady Argent; "and—I am really afraid you won't approve at all, Ludovic—but she is most anxious to be instructed—and really when one remembers that her mother was a Catholic and everything——" She paused helplessly.

"You can't have had her turned into a Catholic already?"

"No—they wouldn't receive her until she knew more about it—but Father Anselm is going to give her a course of instruction by post."

"Mother, you really are not acting fairly by Mrs. Tregaskis."

"Do you think she would mind so very much? After all, Frances is not her daughter."

"The point is that she has not been asked. I really think she has a right to be told, before there is any question of anything so definite as receiving regular instructions."

"Oh, Ludovic, my dear boy! I wish I could get you to look at it as I do. The gain of a soul, you know."

"The end justifies the means," quoted Ludovic, shaking his head and unable to help laughing. "Mother dear, may I talk to her about it?"

"To Frances? Oh yes, dear, I wish you would. I assure you that it's most edifying to see the graces that child has already been given—she seems to believe by

instinct as it were. Perhaps," said Lady Argent with a sort of melancholy hopefulness, "she may be able to show you things in quite a new light."

Ludovic was inclined to think this contingency a remote one, and it did not deter him from seeking a conversation with Frances Grantham.

Something unexpectedly flin like in the quality of her determination came upon him as a surprise.

"I am going to tell Cousin Bertie all about it," she said quietly. "She and Cousin Frederick have the right to be told, but they have not the right to stop me from following my own conscience. I am going to become a Catholic as soon as Father Anselm thinks me sufficiently instructed."

"And when will that be?"

"He thought in about six or eight months, perhaps. But he wants to see me again before then."

"How can you manage that?" asked Ludovic wonderingly.

"I should have to go away, anyhow, to be received. There is no Catholic Church anywhere very near Porthlew. And Father Anselm suggests that I should stay at a convent where they take lady boarders, somewhere between us and London, as he will be coming down there to give a Retreat, which I should make."

She spoke with all the decision of which her gentle tones were capable, and Ludovic realized that she had very definitely made up her young mind. He wondered whether the instinct which he divined to be as strong in her now as in her twelfth year, of childish obedience and submission, would revive under contact with the masterful will of Bertha Tregaskis.

"Surely your guardian will at least want you to wait until you are of age?"

"Why should I? Hazel did not wait to be of age to get married."

Her voice held defiance and Ludovic said gently:

"I am not venturing to condemn your decision. But my mother has had something to do with furthering it, and she would be very sorry, as you know, if it meant distress and difficulties for Mrs. Tregaskis."

"Oh," cried Frances, "I can't bear to think of it. She has always been so very good to us, and you know Hazel's marriage was a dreadful blow to her—it is still, because Guy doesn't let Hazel see much of her—they've only been to Porthlew once, and Cousin Bertie hasn't even seen the baby yet. But how can I help it?"

"It isn't quite the same thing as though she were really your mother, perhaps," Ludovic said kindly.

Frances coloured, and the lines of her soft mouth hardened again.

"It isn't that. God comes before one's father or mother. It would be just as much my duty to become a Catholic now if all my nearest and dearest were against it. I must do what I think right."

In the implacable self-righteousness which Frances mistook for principle, Ludovic saw his mother's best ally.

"I do not suppose that she will ever yield, when it comes to what she thinks is a question of conscience," he told Lady Argent that evening, who replied with surprise:

"I am so delighted that you think so, Ludovic. I always thought she was so very gentle and submissive that perhaps it would be only too easy for anyone to influence her, which would be so dreadful, now that she has really had light given her. Not that I want to judge dear Bertie rashly, but I am afraid it is quite possible that she may raise difficulties."

"Quite possible," Ludovic dryly assented.

It was not altogether without amusement that he foresaw Mrs. Tregaskis engaged in a contest of wills with the youngest and hitherto most easily dominated of her charges. That Frances herself anticipated just such a contest was evident, and Ludovic, almost in spite of himself, wondered whether she did not view the approaching conflict with more complacency than she knew.

As her long visit to the Wye Valley drew towards its close, Frances lost her shyness with Ludovic. Twice he took her across the valley to the cottage where the earlier years of her childhood had been spent, and mar-

elled at the gentle detachment of the looks she cast round her. Insensitive Frances could not be, but Ludovic realized afresh that reality, for her, would never lie on the material planes where most of us turn instinctively to seek it.

Her reserve once broken, she and Lady Argent would gently and interminably discuss the subject of conversion with a soft disregard for his presence and prejudice alike which almost involuntarily caused Ludovic a good deal of amusement.

"It would be such a help to you, dear child," Lady Argent said on the eve of Frances' return to Porthlew, "if you only had some friend quite near, to whom you could talk, because writing is never quite the same thing, as I found with Mother Serafina—you know, dear, the nun who did so much towards my conversion—when she said it was quite out of the question for her to come and stay here, and I must write to her instead. Which, of course, I did, and I still do at Christmas and Easter and any sort of Feast, but it was a most unsatisfactory correspondence—really most unsatisfactory."

"Did the Superior have to read the letters?"

"Yes, dear, all of them, but she'd told me about that, and I didn't mind so much, though it made one a little bit careful, perhaps, as to what one said. But it wasn't really so much what *I* wrote—though that was awkward enough sometimes, between not knowing whether one ought to send one's love to Reverend Mother, or only ask for her prayers—but what *she* wrote. She always signed herself 'Yours affectionately in Christ,' which used to puzzle me dreadfully. (I was still a Protestant in those days)," said Lady Argent in an explanatory parenthesis. "And I used to wonder so very much whether she expected me to sign myself 'Yours affectionately in Christ' back again. It seemed so very unnatural if I did, and yet so very marked if I didn't, as though my affection for her was quite a worldly sort of thing. And then, dear, she always had a long string of letters after her signature—Mary Serafina, and then 'Mother' in brackets and a little cross and P.R.O.S.A., which I used to think for a long time must be Latin, you

know—something like 'Prossit,' whatever that may mean, only feminine, because it ended with a."

"And what was it really?" asked Frances, evidently rejecting this plausible hypothesis.

"My dear, I believe it stands for Professed Religious of the Order of St. Anthony. I quite see that it was very stupid of me not to have thought of it at once, but little things like that puzzle one so much at the beginning, and one doesn't like to ask. That is why I was suggesting," said Lady Argent, ingeniously finding her way back to her original point of departure, "that it would be a help to you if only you had some Catholic friend to whom you could go—or, if that is quite impossible, to whom you could write."

"There is always Mrs. Severing," suggested Frances rather faintly.

Lady Argent looked markedly unenthusiastic, but only remarked in tones of forbearance that Mrs. Severing was not a Catholic.

"I think she will become one, don't you?" said Frances, but there was no conviction in her voice.

"No doubt it is as it will be, dear," Lady Argent replied with cryptic charitableness. "But what I had thought of for you, was to put you in touch with the Superior of the Convent at Plymouth. She is a dear friend of mine, and is particularly fond of girls. They have a big school there, I dare say you have heard of it."

"I don't think so."

"It's very well known, dear, because the girls there always distinguish themselves in all the Oxford local and examinations and things in the most remarkable manner. It is really very curious indeed, when there is such a prejudice against a convent education, but the girls always do better than the high-school girls. The Superior told me so herself."

"How nice!" cried Frances in perfect sincerity.

"Yes, dear, and it really is wonderful, because I know the dear children always wear a special medal of the Holy Ghost when they go to their examinations, so it really is quite wonderful," repeated Lady Argent, who, in common with many other devout souls, would fre-

quently issue meticulous and childlike petitions to Heaven, and then express the greatest astonishment when these requests were acceded to.

"And you see, dear, if you could write quite freely to the Superior it seems to me it would be such a very great help to you, and you needn't feel that the letters wouldn't be quite private, because, being the Superior, of course nobody else reads her letters."

"Thank you very much for thinking of it," said Frances gratefully. "If Cousin Bertie lets me, I should like it very much. You see, I don't want to vex her more than I can help, and I don't think she'll like my writing to Father Anselm much—but that, of course, is a matter of conscience."

It seemed to Ludovic that those three words, as uttered by Frances, would probably be responsible for more numerous and deeper dissensions than any that the house of Tregaskis had yet known.

The next morning he drove Frances to the station. Lady Argent kissed her guest very affectionately as she bade her good-bye, gave her a rosary which had been blessed first by Father Anselm and eventually by Pope Leo XIII., and said earnestly:

"Good-bye, my dearest child, and do write to me and let me know how you get on, and what dear Bertie thinks, though kind and understanding I *know* she'll be, and the grace of God will do the rest, I feel certain. You must come again whenever you like, for we love having you, though I know it's a most awkward journey for you, dear, and I only hope you'll not have too long a wait when you change at Bristol. Have you got your sandwiches, dear?"

Ludovic cut short his parent's farewells, knowing from experience that they were apt to result in a narrow escape from missing the train altogether, and Frances drove away from the Wye Valley.

"I shall be interested to hear of further developments at Porthlew," Ludovic said to his mother that evening. "That little girl is a curious mixture of timidity and determination. I wonder what her sister will think of this?"



"There is only one thing anyone can think, darling," serenely returned Lady Argent, "and that is how very good God has been to that dear child, and I feel sure that He has a number of graces in store for her, for she is so wonderfully good and holy already."

"I am sure of it," gently replied Ludovic.

"I shall miss her," wistfully said Lady Argent, and added after a silence:

"My dearest boy, I do wish you would find some nice Catholic girl and marry her."

Ludovic had heard this aspiration before, and felt no desire to comply with it.

"I'm quite happy as I am, mother darling," he told her gently. "Besides, I don't believe any nice Catholic girl would have me—a bald-headed heretic with a crutch. Now I must do a little writing, and you can say a rosary for my conversion. You know that's what you always do say it for."

"Yes, dear, it is, and one of these days when you least expect it, that prayer will be answered," predicted his mother triumphantly.

"We shall see. You'd better be content with your latest conversion, for the time being. I'm sure it will knock at least five hundred years off your purgatory, as soon as it's a *fait accompli*."

But that the reception of Frances Grantham into the Catholic Church was not to become a *fait accompli* without some previous difficulty, soon became abundantly evident.

Frances did not prove to be a good correspondent, but Lady Argent received one or two letters from her, of which she imparted the contents to Ludovic, and then came a lengthy epistle from Bertha Tregaakis.

"Dearest Sybil, you have been such an angel to my little girl that I make no apology for thrusting her affairs—and my own—upon you. The fact is, the child is perfectly *entichée* with matters religious at the moment, and declares that only the Roman Catholic faith will do for her. You won't misunderstand me if I confess that, if Frances were my own child, I should take away all

her little holy books and ornaments in the midst of which she sits like a young virgin-martyr, and forbid her to speak of the subject again for at least a year. We should then see how much of it was an emotional craze, and how much genuine stuff. But the facts that she is not *quite* my own flesh and blood, and that her own mother did, in actual point of fact, belong to your Faith, make rather a difference. As Frederick says, we have no actual authority over the child, and one hesitates as to how far coercion may be desirable in such a case. Frederick, man-like, refuses to discuss the subject with anybody—what cowards men are! 'Usbands be proper fules for the most part, and us dū arl the yead work for both,' as one of my old women said to me the other day!

"Well, my dear, the upshot of it all is, am I to let the child go to this convent at Easter, where she wants to make a Ladies' Retreat—whatever that may be—and, I suppose, eventually be received into the Catholic Church? Can you tell me anything about this convent, what sort of a woman the Reverend Mother is, and what sort of people she will come across there? I shall send poor Minnie Blandflower with her, if I let her go at all.

"This is a proper ole yarn, isn't it, but I rely on you to understand that I only want what is best for Francie, and am writing to you, since I know you're fond of the child, and can probably advise me as to the convent and other particulars."

"Dear Bertie is most kind-hearted and charitable, isn't she?" said Lady Argent, "and of course I can write and tell her anything she wants to know about the convent. How very glad I am that dear little Frances is going there! but I wish Bertie would send her sister with her, as well as Miss Blandflower."

"I don't think Miss Rosamund is at all inclined to be interested in religion for its own sake, somehow," returned Ludovic, rightly divining that his mother viewed Miss Blandflower and Rosamund alike in the light of possible fish for the convent net.

Lady Argent murmured that the grace of God was

very wonderful, and you couldn't tell at all, and then returned to her correspondence.

"Father Anselm writes that he is very much pleased with her dispositions," she presently observed, looking up from a letter.

"H'm!" said Ludovic, feeling oddly out of charity with the members of religious orders generally, and the Prior of Twickenham in particular.

He speculated often during the next few months as to events at Porthlew, and their effect upon Rosamund and Frances Grantham, but he was much in London and heard little news of them.

It was just before Easter-time that his mother triumphantly told him that the date for Frances' visit to the convent was arranged for the following week.

"And I can't tell you, my dear boy, what a relief it is to me after all the correspondence there has been with dear Bertie, and Father Anselm, and the poor child herself, who never wavered at all, but one couldn't help feeling that at any moment she might begin to wonder whether it wasn't her duty to do as Bertie advised, and wait. So fatal in a question of religion, I always think. And it would have been dreadful to see dear little Frances one of those shilly-shallying souls, never either quite in or quite out of the Church," said Lady Argent, in a voice which had become, to Ludovic's perceptions, charged with reminiscences of Nina Severing.

### XIII

"I'm an impulsive creature," declared Bertha, in despite of the protesting eyebrows which Mrs. Severing instantly erected at the assertion. "It was an impulse that made me allow Francie to accept Sybil Argent's invitation, and I don't mind owning that it was a mistaken one. The child came back more tiresomely self-righteous than she went, and now—as you know—we've practically consented to the whole business."

"Of course, darling," said Nina tenderly, "I do not look upon it in the light that you do, but at the same time, you know, if I had once said *no* to a child of mine, *no* it should remain. Nothing is more fatal than a half-consent, to my mind."

"Indeed, Nina. And when does Morris come home, may I ask?" said Bertha acidly, and had the satisfaction of seeing her friend colour faintly, as she replied with what both of them knew to be more spirit than sincerity:

"Any time, now. I expect him from day to day, practically. But a young man is a very different matter to a little girl, Bertie, though perhaps only we mothers of sons really appreciate that."

Bertha changed the subject.

"Frances goes to this convent next week, when they appear to be giving a Retreat of some sort, and after that I suppose she'll become an R.C. outright. As Frederick says, we're not in a position actually to forbid it, so we may as well make the best of it. I hate making a compromise, and yet, since the children grew up, I've been doing nothing else, it seems to me."

"Poor dear! But I'm sure it'll be better for everyone when the child's actually taken a decisive step. She'll be much more settled afterwards."

"Settled in the wrong direction!" sighed Bertha. "However, she's always been a good little thing, and

except for this unfortunate fancy, we've never had any difficulties. So unlike poor Rosamund! As Frederick says, it's the only form of self-will Frances has ever shown, and though she is obstinate, it isn't quite the same thing as Rosamund's constant perversity."

"A fit of religion might be no bad thing for *her*."

"I quite agree—but there isn't a sign of it. Frances suggested her making this Retreat affair too, but she wouldn't hear of it—fortunately enough, perhaps, since I should certainly have had to put my foot down. I shall have to send poor Minnie with Frances, I suppose."

"Let me take her!" suddenly exclaimed Nina, with an air of self-abnegation. "I have been thinking of making a Retreat for some time."

Bertha was as well aware as Nina herself that "some time" only covered the last five seconds of time, but the advantages of Nina's suggestion were too obvious for her to point out any flaws in the proposal.

"But, my dear, should you like it? A whole week at a place of that sort, and nothing on earth to do!"

"To 'make my soul,' Bertie. It would be such a rest—such a help. Not the teachings and sermonizings, you know, but quiet hours to myself in the garden and the chapel, a little time to read and meditate. . . ."

"I don't understand you, Nina. You don't mean to become a Roman Catholic, so what's the fun of dabbling in it?"

Nina understood that the unnecessary bluntness in her friend's phraseology had been brought there by a certain rapt dreaminess of which she was fully conscious in her own expression.

"Dear Bertie," she said softly, "it is quite true that I *can't* be bound by any of the conventional laws of religion, but mayn't I seek comfort where I can best find it?"

Bertha became, if possible, more matter-of-fact than before, in antagonistic contrast to this soulful appeal.

"You know they charge for your board and lodging at these places?"

Nina's tinkling laugh pealed protestingly.

"My dear, how desperately practical you always are!"

It's positively comic. Do you know, that I'm sometimes tempted to think that you and I represent the two types——"

"Martha and Mary," Bertha, unkindly forestalled her friend's seasoned witticism. "I know, dear, though perhaps there's a good deal more of the Mary in me than you suppose—but I know it's difficult to judge of people who have the misfortune to be as reserved as I am. However, if you really have taken a fancy to this scheme, by all means let Francie go with you. I shall be only too delighted, and it will be a relief to Minnie."

"Poor Miss Blandflower! I can't quite see her in a convent atmosphere, I admit."

"*Qu' allait-elle faire dans cette galère,*" hummed Bertha.

Nina, who did not like Bertha's admirable French accent, immediately gave a small exasperated shriek.

"Out of tune, my dear! You were at least a semi-tone out—*Aie!*"

The annoyance which is common to everybody when accused, whether falsely or otherwise, of singing out of tune, was evident on Bertha's broad, good-humoured face, and went some way towards consoling Nina for a rather impulsive decision.

Some few days later, she and Frances Graham went together to the convent.

"I'm glad the Retreat doesn't begin till the day after to-morrow," said Frances rather nervously, as they waited outside the tall, narrow building, situated at the extreme end of the small provincial town. "It will give us time to get used to everything, and perhaps to know one or two of the nuns."

"The Superior's letter to me was charming," said Nina firmly, "quite charming, and I almost feel as though I knew her already. Somehow one has a sort of awareness of anyone with whom one is in tune, don't you think so? It's almost a sense of recognition."

Mrs. Severing's recognition of Mère Pauline, however, did not appear likely to progress beyond this initial stage for some time after a very aged lay-sister in a black veil and habit had conducted the travellers into a large

and plainly furnished parlour, and left them to await the Superior's arrival.

"Can we have mistaken the date?" asked Nina, when a quarter of an hour had elapsed and their solitude still remained undisturbed.

"Perhaps she is very busy, if a lot of people are arriving to make the Retreat," suggested Frances doubtfully.

They exchanged surmises at intervals for another ten minutes.

"Do open the door, Francie," said Nina at last in annoyed accents. "That stupid old sister must have forgotten us."

Frances rather unwillingly looked into the dark, narrow passage.

A couple of girls with black lace veils pinned over untidy hair, and falling incongruously across plaid blouses, were skirmishing and giggling at one end of the corridor. They broke off as Frances opened the door and at the same instant one of them exclaimed:

*"Chut! Notre Mère!"*

A very small, black-clad figure advanced through a further door, and Frances, hurriedly retreating, was in time to see the two girls make a sort of subdued dash towards her which the Superior put aside with a gentle but very decided little movement of the hand, and *"Pas ici, mes enfants."*

The next moment she came into the parlour.

Mère Pauline was an exceedingly small, upright person, with black eyes to which a pair of large round spectacles gave an air of inquiry, a hooked nose, and a thin, decided little mouth. She spoke English fluently, although with the unmistakable accent and intonation of a French-woman.

"Mrs. Severing?" she inquired of Nina. "I am very glad to see you—and this is Lady Argent's little friend. I may call you Frances, dear? I 'ave 'eard so much about you. 'Ow nice to see you 'ere."

Like the majority of her countrywomen, she altogether ignored the letter H.

After a few moments conversation, the nun offered to show her visitors to their bedrooms.

"We have not much room," she said smilingly, preceding them up a long flight of narrow stairs. "The house is full of ladies who are come for the Retreat, as well as all our permanent lady-boarders."

"Have you many?" inquired Nina, panting slightly from the ascent, which Mère Pauline was conducting with a sort of businesslike rapidity.

"Six or seven who are permanently at home here, and then a number which is always varying, of young girls whose parents have confided them to us for a time to learn English. They are for the most part Spanish, or French. They have given up their rooms for the Retreat, and have moved upstairs into the piano-cells," said Mère Pauline serenely.

She stopped before a door where a neat card was pinned with Mrs. Severing's name upon it. Just above it, a red-bordered scroll proclaimed in Gothic lettering "Ste. Perpétue."

"I have put you into Ste. Perpétue as it has a very nice aspect," announced the Superior, "and Frances is next door—Ste. Félicitée. You see, you can look out upon our little piece of garden."

She advanced into the room, which was a very small and narrow one, with distempered green walls, a low iron bedstead, a washing-stand and minute chest-of-drawers combined, a straw-bottomed chair and one strip of faded carpet beside the bed. A plaster crucifix and a blue china holy-water stoup hung against the wall. Underneath stood the only concession to worldly requirements that the room contained—a looking-glass framed in wood, placed upon a tall packing-case indifferently disguised by a white and beautifully darned cotton cover.

The slight shade of dismay which had crossed Nina's face on entering, gave way almost instantly to a suitable expression of enchantment, as she exclaimed in low, heartfelt tones:

"A convent cell! Ah, how I have dreamed of finding myself in one."

If Mère Pauline failed to see the applicability of this description to one of her most cherished guest-chambers,



she made no sign of it, but merely proceeded to conduct Frances into the exactly similar room adjoining.

"I hope you will be very happy here, dear child," she said kindly, "and that we shall have many little talks later on. The Retreat does not begin till to-morrow night, so you will have time to look about you."

"I thought it began the day after to-morrow," said Frances.

"So it does, but you will enter into silence on the previous night," said the Superior. "But here is our programme awaiting you."

She picked up a small leaflet, neatly written out in violet ink, from the washing-stand, which also appeared destined to fulfil the ordinary functions of a table, and left her guests to study it, with the warning that a bell would shortly summon them to supper in the dining-room.

"Supper at six o'clock!" exclaimed Nina. "What an extraordinary hour. I wonder if we have it with the nuns."

"I think the community live in a different part of the house altogether," said Frances diffidently, "and I'm sure we don't have meals with them."

"How do you know?"

"I've been reading one or two lives of nuns lately—Lady Argent lent me some," murmured Frances, and hastily changed the conversation by beginning to read aloud from the purple leaflet.

"7 a.m. Mass for those following the Retreat.

"8 a.m. Breakfast.

"8.30 a.m. to 10 a.m. Free time in the garden.

"10 a.m. First Meditation.

"11 a.m. to 12 a.m. Free time for writing.

"12 a.m. Dinner.

"1 p.m. Exercise in the garden.

"2 p.m. Second Meditation.

"3 p.m. to 5 p.m. Free time. Tea [if desired] at 4 o'clock.

"5 p.m. Rosary in the Chapel and Benediction.

"5.30 p.m. Instruction in the Chapel.

"6 p.m. Supper.

"6.30 p.m. to 7.30 p.m. Free time.

"7.30 p.m. Way of the Cross and night prayers in the Chapel."

"I'm not sure how far it will be wise to follow the routine," said Nina rather languidly. "I certainly can't meditate to order. But no doubt these rules are only for the girls she was speaking about, and have nothing to do with visitors."

"Oh, but I like the idea of rules," said Frances quickly. "It's such a help to do things regularly, it seems to me, and all together."

"Ah, little one, you are still child enough to feel it so. When one is as tired and heavy-hearted as I am sometimes . . ."

Perhaps Nina was not altogether sorry that a violent bell-ringing interrupted these mournful reflections without allowing time for their completion.

"How shall we find the dining-room?" said Frances, preparing to descend the stairs.

"There can't be very many rooms to choose from, in such a small house. I wonder what their idea of dinner may be—or supper, I suppose one ought to call it. Not bread and water, I do trust."

Nina's gloomy forebodings were not realized. The meal was abundant and not badly cooked, from potato soup to hashed mutton and cabinet pudding.

A rather formidable-looking old lady of immense size, with the inevitable black veil on her scanty white hair, and a bristling moustache adorning her upper lip, sat at the head of the long table. Opposite her was a stout Spanish girl who might have been of any age between eighteen and thirty-five, with oily-looking plaits of black hair coiled flatly against each ear. The intervening places were for the most part filled with black-clad, creaking ladies of uncertain years, each one of whom was either extremely fat or abnormally thin, and a sprinkling of French and Spanish girls in brightly coloured blouses with the black veil either pinned on to each *chignon* or flung scarf-wise over the shoulders.

A young English nun greeted the new-comers as they made their rather tardy appearance.

"Mrs. Severing, isn't it—and Miss Grantham! Just in time for supper. Will you sit here, Mrs. Severing, next to Mrs. Mulholland!"

The mountainous Mrs. Mulholland bowed ceremoniously from her seat at the head of the table.

"And you'll sit here, dear, next to your friend," the nun continued to Frances. "Now you must all make acquaintance as quickly as you can, since by this time to-morrow there'll be no more talking and the opportunity will be gone."

There was a general laugh at this pleasantry, in which the nun herself joined heartily as she left the dining-room.

Mrs. Mulholland turned to Nina Severing.

"This is the first time you've been here, isn't it?"

"Yes. We've just come for the Retreat."

"I have followed the Retreat here every year," said Mrs. Mulholland triumphantly, "for the last eighteen years. I haven't missed one of them. Poor Monseigneur Miller, who used always to give it, used to say that he couldn't have given out the points for the meditations if he hadn't seen me at my own *prie-dieu*, in my own corner of the Chapel. Did you ever meet Monseigneur Miller?"

"No, I'm afraid not. You see I'm not——"

"Ah well! he's been dead more than ten years, and we've had several priests for the Ladies' Retreat since then. Last year we had Father Aloysius Paxton—a Jesuit. His note was *Repentance*—the whole Retreat was *Repentance*—based on that, practically. Now I hear that this man, who is coming to-morrow, takes quite a different line. Wasn't it you, Miss Benjafield, who told me that Father Anselm preaches his retreats altogether in the spirit of Hope?"

"So my sister tells me, Mrs. Mulholland," replied an anæmic-looking woman from the other side of the table. "My Carmelite sister, you know, not the Poor Clare one. Pass the potatoes, if you please. Thank you. Yes, he

gave them a Retreat which they liked very much, I believe."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Mulholland condescendingly. "The Carmelites make a longer Retreat than ours, I know. I dare say it's quite in accordance with the spirit of the Order, but I must say, what's good enough for *our* Order is good enough for me. I always tell Mère Pauline that an eight-day Retreat wouldn't be at all too much for us—it's what the nuns make themselves."

"Oh, Mrs. Mulholland! I think five days is quite enough to keep silence for!" cried a merry-looking French girl, with an air of saying something audacious.

"Ah, we have to make allowances for you young things. But I always make up for it later in the year, by coming to the meditations in the chapel given for the nuns' Retreat, you know. Of course," said Mrs. Mulholland, slightly lowering her voice and turning towards Nina, "Mère Pauline doesn't allow the ladies to follow the nuns' Retreat at all as a rule; it's quite an exception. But, of course, I've been here a number of years, and am almost like one of themselves in a way. I have a very regular rule of life—under direction, of course, under direction."

The other ladies, who were evidently well used to the recital of Mrs. Mulholland's spiritual privileges, resumed conversation briskly among themselves and speculations as to the coming Retreat mingled with the emphatically related anecdotes of the younger girls as to sudden and disconcerting encounters with Mère Pauline—"Just as I was saying that I didn't think I'd go to Vespers to-day. Do you think she heard, my dear?"

"I must introduce you all round after supper," said Mrs. Mulholland, looking amiably at Nina. "You see, I'm quite the oldest inhabitant here—in point of stay. I've sat at the head of this table, Mrs. Severing, for the past fifteen years—ever since poor old Miss O'Malley died. She used to sit here when I first came—she'd been here for twenty years, and was a sister of one of the old nuns—but she took to her own room some six months before she died, and I was asked to come to the head of

the table in her place, and there I've been ever since. I was asked to take it, mind you. The Superior before this one, Mère Alphonsine, who was alive then, asked me herself to take the head of the table. "*Vous dirigerez un peu la conversation*," she said to me. I like the conversation at the ladies' table to be edifying—as cheerful as you please—but edifying. No grumbling—no gossip—no uncharitable speaking. So that's my little task—one of my little tasks—to keep up the tone of the conversation at meals. Now a few years ago, Mrs. Severing, we had Lady O'Hagan here—a very nice woman indeed—widow of Sir Patrick O'Hagan, of whom you may have heard—a very well-known Catholic family. Well, the lay sister who waits on us here, put Lady O'Hagan at the head of the table, and moved my place to the side. An ignorant lay sister, you see, very well-meaning, but thought that because of the title this good woman should be put at the head. 'Now,' I said, 'Lady O'Hagan is only here for a few days'—just for a Retreat she'd come—'and it doesn't matter to me—I've got my position here, have had for years—it *doesn't matter to me*. But it is what it ought to be! Mère Alphonsine asked me to take the head of the table—well and good—I took it. I've had it ever since. If you ask me, I don't think I ought to give it up. Mère Alphonsine had her reasons for putting me there, and there I consider I ought to stay until I'm told otherwise. Of course, one word from the Superior and I move at once. That's obedience. I'm not under vows, Mrs. Severing, but I consider myself just as much bound to obedience as any postulant in the house. Well, I spoke to Mère Econome—she's by way of looking after the ladies—and she, being Spanish, didn't quite understand the case. Thought it didn't matter—only a question of a few days—and so on. 'That's not right,' said I. 'That's not the point,' I said. 'The point is, *what ought to be*.' So I went straight to Mère Pauline. Straight to the Superior—that's my motto, Mrs. Severing. Always go straight to the Superior. I said: 'It's not a question of minding—I'll move my place to-morrow if that's what you think best,' I said,

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'but let it be under obedience. A question of obedience,' I said, 'and you're given the grace to carry it out.' That's all I said: 'A question of obedience,' I said.

"Mrs. Mulholland," Mère Pauline said, 'I should be very much distressed indeed to think of your moving. Please stay where you've always been, and remember that we look to you to raise the tone of the conversation and render it all it should be.' Now, after that, Mrs. Severing, do you wonder that I look upon my place here as a duty—as a positive responsibility?"

"No, indeed," said Nina rather faintly.

"We've always been very careful, of course, as to the ladies we receive here," continued Mrs. Mulholland, as usual identifying herself with the community. "There's never any question of gossip, you know—anything of that sort. But, of course, with so many young people—foreigners too—one must keep a lookout—just a lookout. There's sometimes a little criticizing—a remark or two passed: 'I don't like Mother So-and-So'—'Sister this or Sister the other is too sharp in her manner for me.' Now that's what I am here to stop. 'That'll do, my dear,' I say. 'That's enough.' Never more than that, you know—only 'That'll do, my dear,' just like that. 'We don't find fault with the nuns here,' I say. 'You must go somewhere else if you want a spirit of disloyalty. We don't stock it here.' Passing it off, you see, with a joke. That's all I ever say, and I assure you it's always been efficacious."

"I'm sure it has," began Nina again. "Do you——"

"We're quite a large party here for the moment owing to the Retreat, but, of course, at other times it's more like a family—there's not the same necessity," pursued Mrs. Mulholland, warming to her theme, "for keeping a sharp eye open—or perhaps I ought to say a sharp ear." She paused to laugh heartily. "I don't want to give you the impression that I'm a sort of policeman, waiting to pounce, Mrs. Severing, or you'll be afraid to open your lips. We're all very glad, on the contrary, to see a new face now and then, and hear some-

thing fresh. Though I always tell Mère Pauline that I think we ladies ought to have a rule of silence at meals, just as the community has. That's what I should like."

The fervour of this aspiration was only equalled by the intensity with which it was inwardly echoed by Mrs. Severing.

#### XIV

As the meal drew towards a close two or three of the girls began to push back their chairs, murmuring to their neighbours: "Well—if you'll excuse me," and left the room after a rapid Sign of the Cross, apparently directed at the centre of the table. Mrs. Mulholland inclined her monumental bulk over her empty plate for a few seconds, crossed herself devoutly two or three times, and then said rather majestically to Nina Severing:

"If you care to go over the house and garden a little later on, you must come to my room. On the ground floor, the first door you see at the end of that passage. It's been my room for eighteen years. It's a great joke in the community that I've been here longer than Mère Pauline has—several years longer. I was here in the time of Mère Alphonsine—a great saint, Mère Alphonsine—ah, yes, indeed. Not that I mean to say Mère Pauline isn't a saint in her own way, you know, but of course there it is. I remember her arrival here as a young nun who'd not yet taken her final vows. I was here for her profession fifteen years ago. I often chaff her about it, you know. 'Ah, notre Mère,' I say, 'remember I was here before you were.' It's quite a household joke, I assure you. 'Mrs. Mulholland was here before you were,' the nuns say. I believe it's quite a catchword at the community recreations. Now let me show you my room, Mrs. Severing; you must learn to find your way here, you know. *La mère des Dames—pensionnaires*, the lay sisters call me. That's right, Miss Grantham—come right in."

Mrs. Mulholland waved a hospitable hand at Frances, who accepted the invitation with the more diffidence that the small room appeared strangely crowded already.

A little table in the window was laden with books grouped at the foot of an immense crucifix, devotional



pictures, and slender brackets on which were balanced perilously-poised statuettes plastered the wall, a holy-water stoup slung with rosaries decorated the door, and fragments of dried palm tied with red ribbon hung cross-wise over the bed. Below this came yet another crucifix and a large framed scrollwork announcing the reception of Mary-Theresa Aloysia Leaky into the Sodality of the Children of Mary some fifty odd years ago. A bulging curtain in an angle of the wall evidently sheltered Mrs. Mulholland's wardrobe, of which the surplus appeared to be housed in variously shaped and sized card-board boxes with defective lids, that could be seen under the bed and stacked in corners.

"Sit down," cried the owner of the room cordially, and thrust upon Mrs. Severing's notice the small rush chair which was the only one she appeared to possess.

"Miss Grantham won't mind a seat on the bed."

"I'm afraid we really mustn't stay," began Nina, who had been wearing her celebrated resemblance to a hot-house flower buffeted by rude winds for some time, and was not best pleased at its utter absence of effect.

A bell clanged two strokes and then three. Mrs. Mulholland, who had just sunk heavily on to the foot of the bed, heaved herself up again with an air of startled attention and stood listening.

"There! What did I tell you?" she peremptorily inquired of Frances. "That's Mother Juliana's bell, and she won't be able to hear it. I happen to know that she's in the chapel at this very moment. I suppose she's wanted for the parlour again, but evidently the sister doesn't know she's in the chapel."

The bell, regardless of Mrs. Mulholland, inexorably clanged out a second summons similar to the first.

"What's the use of ringing like that? She *can't* hear it if she's in the chapel. I see what it is—I shall have to go and tell her myself. Dear, dear, this is a business," said Mrs. Mulholland, opening the door with a careworn expression of importance.

Nina instantly took the opportunity of escaping, and imperatively signed to Frances to do likewise. They followed Mrs. Mulholland down the passage, still listening

to the confidences which she imparted over her shoulder in a hoarse, sibilant whisper.

"Mother Juliana is the infirmarian—regular as clock-work as a rule—one always knows just where to find her at this hour. But I happen to know that to-day's an exception. I happen to know she's had to make her spiritual reading now, instead of at four o'clock. Nothing very serious, you know, but just a little alteration in the routine, of which I happened to know. Just hark at that bell! Evidently no one knows where to find her. Fortunately, as it chanced, I just happen to know she's here . . ."

Mrs. Mulholland paused with evident enjoyment outside the green baize door leading to the chapel, gathered her ample black skirts tightly round her with one hand, and advanced with elaborate creakings, on the tips of her toes, leaving the swing-door open behind her.

Frances and Nina both gazed into the pretty softly-lighted chapel, with the low carven stalls where knelt an occasional black-robed figure. Rows of light oak benches occupied the back half of the little church, and were evidently destined for the occupation of visitors to the convent.

Mrs. Mulholland, on the threshold, startled them both by wheeling abruptly round and proffering a liberally-splashed finger from the marble shell containing holy water at the door.

Neither Nina nor Frances had presence of mind to avail themselves of the opportunity thus suddenly thrust upon them, and Mrs. Mulholland, erecting her eyebrows with an expression of regret, resumed her cautious progress in the direction of a devoutly-bent form kneeling in the first stall.

As she sank heavily on her knees on to the floor and began a rapid and hoarsely whispered conversation, which the black veil punctuated by an occasional inclination, Nina murmured hastily to Frances:

"Come upstairs again before she gets out. I can't stand any more of this!"

They fled noiselessly.

"Well!" said Nina in the sanctuary of her own room.

which now appeared to her as a veritable haven of refuge, "if this is what they call the peace of convent-life . . ."

"It will be silence after to-morrow," said Frances consolingly.

"I long for it," murmured Mrs. Severing, who had never before made the aspiration with such perfect sincerity.

"You look so tired. Do lie down and let me unpack for you."

"Darling child!" cried Nina, sinking on to the bed, "I shouldn't dream of letting you do such a thing. Why should you? Oh, don't pull at the straps like that, dearest. My keys are in that little bag there."

Frances unpacked.

Towards the close of this operation there was a knock at the door, and a smiling old lay sister remarked triumphantly:

"Mère Pauline is waiting to see you in the little parlour downstairs, dear. Come along."

Nina rose with languid grace.

"No, no, dear," said the lay sister, still smiling. "It's this child." She laid her hand on Frances' arm. "You're the little one that's to be received into Holy Church after Easter, aren't you?"

"I hope so," stammered Frances.

"Come along, dear, then. I dare say," she added consolingly over her shoulder to Nina, "that Mère Pauline will be able to spare you a little while of her time during the Retreat, you know."

The outraged Mrs. Severing was left to her own reflections for the next two hours.

"What *have* you been doing?" she demanded plaintively of Frances on her return.

Frances' colour was heightened and her eyes shining.

"Mère Pauline stayed with me in the parlour for quite a long time, and was so very kind and understanding—I've never met anyone who understood things so well—and then she took me into the chapel. And then, just as I was coming up again, a sister told me that Father Anselm Windsor was here, and had asked to see me. You know I met him at the Twickenham Monastery

when Lady Argent took me there, and he is instructing me."

"So you had an extra catechism lesson!"

"It wasn't exactly that," said Frances simply. "He just talked to me very kindly, and explained a little about the Retreat, and I asked him if I couldn't be received into the Church now. I think they will let me, at the end of the Retreat."

Frances went to her own room that evening in a sort of dreamy happiness that was yet more poignant than any her short life had yet known. A sense of security, of having found some long-sought atmosphere of rest, pervaded her.

She was only roused from the lengthy and ardent thanksgiving which she was offering upon her knees when Mrs. Severing softly opened the door, retreating again as she perceived Frances' attitude of devotion, but murmuring as she went:

"A most amusing thought has just struck me, Francie. These sweet nuns live so much out of the world, and are so much wrapped up in their prayers and things, that I dare say poor Mère Pauline doesn't even know *who I am*."

If Mrs. Severing, however, supposed that the revelation of her identity with the composer of the "Kismet" series would operate a startling change in Mère Pauline's outlook, she was doomed to disappointment.

That imperturbable woman, when confronted next day with the casual announcement that Nina had composed "a certain amount of church music, as well as the more or less well-known songs, which had really made one's name, of course," merely replied with perfect placidity, and a smile that was rather encouraging than admiring:

"*Aha? O'est gentil!*"

"That dear nun is really positively medieval!" was Mrs. Severing's exasperated inward ejaculation after receiving this commentary upon her life-work.

But it was not Nina's way to leave any possible stone unturned in the direction of obtaining that sympathetic admiration which she felt her nature to require.

"I came here to seek a little peace—a little forgetfulness," was her next effort, this time in the vein of resigned pathos. "Ah, mother, you who live such a sheltered life—so free from trouble and temptation, can hardly guess what sorrows there are in the world."

"Every life has its trials," rather austere replied Mère Pauline, not improbably reckoning the dissection of Mrs. Severing's soul amongst these latter.

"I married very, very young—a child—and was left alone so early, with another child to guide and bring up. I have a son, you know."

"Indeed? That must be a great consolation to you, madame."

"Not altogether," sighed Nina truthfully. "There are sorrows of which a mother does not speak."

Mère Pauline appearing more nearly disposed to conform to this axiom than was altogether desirable, Nina was obliged to add hastily:

"But you will let me speak freely to you? Mine is a terribly reserved nature, and for so many years I have kept everything to myself."

"Speak, madame, speak. Tell me all that you will," said Mère Pauline in accents which custom and virtue alike prevented from sounding too markedly resigned.

Nina embarked upon the story of her grief. Morris was the prodigal son—wild, undisciplined, ungrateful, straying in far foreign lands and leaving an adoring—and still youthful—parent to deplore his want of affection and of consideration in the solitude of a country retreat. Only Mrs. Severing's Creator shared with her the knowledge of what such a desertion meant to the heart of a mother.

"*Il faut prier.*"

Pray! Did not Nina spend the long, lonely watches of the night in prayers and supplications for the erring one? Was not this very Retreat to be the occasion of further petitions on his behalf? Mère Pauline would join with her in storming Heaven for this object?

"But certainly." Mère Pauline's tone was gravely compassionate. She spoke of trust, patience, and sacrifices to be offered, and the little homily was accompanied

by a pressure of the hand and softened glance that caused Nina inwardly to retract, or at least modify as far as she herself was concerned, the accusation of medievalism.

"After all," she told herself, retiring in some satisfaction from the interview, "she is beginning to understand that one came here from a *motive*. It's probably a relief to listen to something *real*, after the endless chatter of that terrible Mulholland woman." A heavy step hastening up the stairs behind her caused Mrs. Severing to glance round with an apprehension that proved to be only too well founded.

"Mrs. Severing! Mrs. Severing! Just wait one minute. The stairs try me a little, you know, but I was determined to catch up with you," panted Mrs. Mulholland. "I just want to say one word."

Nina paused reluctantly, one foot upon the step above that on which she was standing, and one hand determinedly grasping the banisters. Mrs. Mulholland stood just below, heaving from her exertions, and evidently only pausing for sufficient breath to continue the ascent.

"You escaped me somehow at the chapel door yesterday, and I've been looking for you ever since—just one word I wanted to say, before we all go into silence. I looked for you this morning, but I don't join the ladies at breakfast, you know, I just have a cup of tea at seven o'clock. A cup of tea—that's all I ever take. The fact is, I always go to the Community Mass at six o'clock. It isn't the custom for all the ladies to hear Mass then—they have their own Mass, at a later hour, as you know. But I always go to the six o'clock, and stay on for Office afterwards. And then I have just a cup of tea. Doesn't give any real trouble to anyone, you know, not if it's done regularly."

"No," said Nina in tones which hitherto had invariably proved sufficient, from the talented Mrs. Severing, to discourage any attempt at over-familiarity on the part of her social inferiors. "Do I understand that you want to speak to me, Mrs.—er——?"

But even the transparent and insulting manoeuvre of appearing to find Mrs. Mulholland's name beneath her powers of recollection, served Mrs. Severing nothing.

"Not here—not here," said Mrs. Mulholland rebukefully. "Talking on the stairs is quite against our convent rules, you know. Mère Pauline doesn't like it at all. One or two of the French girls now, you know—I sometimes find them chattering to one another as they go up or come down—and I always say, 'Not here, my dears. Not here,' I say. 'Talk as much as ever you like in the parlour or the dining-room, but not here. Not on the stairs. Mère Pauline doesn't like it,' I say. But of course you're a stranger here, and can't be expected to know all our little regulations. That's why I am making an exception of you. But it doesn't do if we make a practice of it, or give a bad example."

Nina was so far from wishing to make a practice of conversing on the stairs with Mrs. Mulholland, that she was goaded into saying faintly:

"Perhaps we could come into one of the parlours for a moment—if you wish to speak to me. I don't want to break any rules, and if it would annoy Mère Pauline to find anybody talking on the stairs——"

"That's right, Mrs. Severing, that's right. Why, you're quite an example to our younger generation!" was the unfortunate comment selected by Mrs. Mulholland to express her admiration for this docility. "But you're all right under my wing, you know—Mère Pauline wouldn't say a word if she found you with me. Now come along into the parlour. I think there's one vacant."

Mrs. Mulholland, hurrying downstairs again, consulted her watch.

"Let me see—Office won't be over for another twenty minutes—we're safe till then. Mère Pauline is pretty sure to be called to the parlour after that, you know—poor thing, she sometimes hasn't a minute to call her own all day, and I happen to know she's very tired just now—very tired indeed. Of course, she never spares herself, and one isn't supposed to say anything much about it, but I'm a little bit in the know, as they say, and she's very tired just at present, is Mère Pauline. I wish we could spare her more—but there it is! The life of a religious is a hard one, and this is a strict order, Mrs. Severing, as you may have found out."

"Indeed!"

"Oh, very strict!" cried Mrs. Mulholland breezily, apparently supposing that Nina's frozen ejaculation intimated a desire for further information. "A lot of people in the world rather fancy we aren't so very severe, you know, when they see Mère Pauline and Mother Juliana and all of them so frequently in the parlour—but that's all part of the spirit of the order. To help those in the world, and bring souls to God, Mrs. Severing." Mrs. Mulholland's bass voice thickened a little with earnest feeling, and her rather hard black eyes grew ardent.

"But I mustn't stay. I haven't said Office yet. Oh, I always follow the Office, Mrs. Severing, though I generally take my breviaries out into the garden, at midday. Now what was it I wanted to say to you!—oh, about Mother Juliana it was. Nothing very much, you know, but I thought I'd better give you the least little hint." She lowered her tones mysteriously. "Don't say anything about Mother Juliana's having made her Spiritual Reading at a different hour yesterday."

Nina looked wholly bewildered.

"You know I told you she was in the chapel, yesterday, when the bell was ringing, because there'd been a little alteration," pursued Mrs. Mulholland earnestly. "It's better not to have any talk about these things. People don't always quite understand—outside people, you know—they think it sounds like irregularity. One doesn't want to give occasion for that sort of talk, you know. You don't mind my telling you, Mrs. Severing? I know you're new to our convent ways. Not a Catholic, are you?"

"No."

"Not a Catholic," assented Mrs. Mulholland with unabated cheerfulness. "Well, well, well. You must let me say a little prayer for you now and then. Now I'm going to give you a *special* intention in my Office."

She gave the paralyzed Mrs. Severing a couple of friendly little taps on the shoulder, and hurried away, opening her large black book of devotions as she went, and Nina, still rooted to the spot, presently saw her



from the window, a large, unwieldy figure, pounding steadily round and round the small garden, her black skirts pinned up over a black stuff petticoat, her spectacled gaze fixed upon her manual, and her lips moving rapidly.

"Oh, here you are!" said Frances, entering the parlour to find Mrs. Severing fixedly contemplating this spectacle from the window.

"I was brought here by the Mulholland woman," said Nina bitterly. "There seems to be no escaping her. Does she run the whole convent, may I ask?"

Frances wisely declined to become controversial on the point. "I think she means to be very kind to us."

"I must say, I can't help being very much amused," said Nina in infuriated accents, "at the absurd tone of patronage she adopts towards me. It really makes me laugh."

Laughter was not the predominant emotion discernible in Mrs. Severing's voice, but Frances was in a state of spiritual exaltation that rendered her completely oblivious of outward impressions.

In all the absolute novelty of her surroundings the singleness of mind which was characteristic of Frances led her to seek and find only that penetration into detail, that individual discipline, which she had instinctively asked from the Catholic Church. The convent world, where religion, and the outward and inward practice of religion, were the only admitted goals, brought to her mind that singular sense of completeness which is only achieved in an atmosphere where the scale of relative values held by our surroundings is identical to that which we have long borne in our own inner consciousness. She wrote long and happy letters to Rosamund.

Far otherwise was it with the unfortunate Nina Severing, who had already written to Morris, with whom she maintained a desultory correspondence that alternated between indignant denunciations and affectionate confidences, that "it really was too bad of Bertie to persuade me into this trip, simply because she wouldn't undertake it herself. The nuns are very happy and

peaceful in their narrow little world, but it is a narrow and borned outlook, and naturally a woman of my temperament, who has seen a great deal of life, is altogether out of her element here."

Nina generally wrote with greater frankness to her son than to anyone else. The mental affinity between them was a strong one, and each was more agreeably aware of it when away from the other's immediate society.

This aspect of her relations between herself and her prodigal, however, was not presented by Nina to Mère Pauline.

Morris served, as it were, as the *point d'appui* on which Mère Pauline's interest in Mrs. Severing's spiritual perambulations rested. It was painfully evident that in the eyes of the whole community the event of the Retreat was to be Miss Grantham's reception into the Church—Mrs. Severing was merely an accessory, and one of considerably less importance, moreover, than even that unknown quantity, the family of the young convert who had, it was understood, given so generous a consent to her admission into the fold.

It grew hourly more imperatively evident to Nina that in Morris, and Morris alone, lay her sole claim to distinction.

"Ah, la pauvre ! Elle a un fils qui la fait bien souffrir. Il faut prier, n'est-ce pas ?"

Such murmurs, from one to another of the community, might add faint lustre to Mrs. Severing's name.

"Very interesting your little friend is, very interesting," said Mrs. Mulholland to the reluctant Nina on the evening when the Retreat was about to begin. "We shall none of us forget her in our prayers, I'm sure—but I shall remember you too, Mrs. Severing. You have your troubles, I know—who hasn't—but I shan't forget yours during this holy time—no, indeed. I declare there's the bell—we must go to the chapel. Well, well, pray for me and I'll pray for you."

Mrs. Mulholland adjusted her veil, stuffed a monstrous pile of small books and devotional-looking little black notebooks under her arm, grasped her long string of black rosary-beads, and hastily joined the stream of

devout and thronging ladies now making towards the open door of the chapel.

It was on the day following that Morris Severing violently disconcerted his parent and rejoiced the hearts of those who had been devoutly praying for his return into the paths of filial devotion, by suddenly arriving in a small motor at the convent door and charming the old lay sister who opened it by his eager and affectionate announcement that he had come in order to surprise his mother.

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## XV

WHETHER or no Morris was fully aware of the complete success which crowned this endeavour might remain open to question. He had recently, while in Paris, made an Italian friend who, a victim to home sickness, had spoken much and eloquently of "*la famiglia*" in distant Rome. The impressionable Morris, rapidly becoming a dozen times more home-sick, if possible, than his friend, was soon finding it imperative that he should return to Penservern, and his widowed mother. The reception, on the very morning of his departure, of Nina's letter announcing her sudden descent upon the convent, had merely served to increase her son's impetuous ardour for a meeting.

"I thought of you in uncongenial surroundings, as you wrote that you were, and probably lonely, and I felt I had to come," said Morris, with the direct and manly air of simplicity that he always regarded as one of his achievements.

"And how many times during the last year have I written and told you that I was lonely, and implored you to come home, and you have turned a deaf ear, Morris!" asked Nina, with stern sadness.

His face hardened—intentionally.

"I have made a mistake, evidently. I thought that after all these months—but I might have known——" He broke off with a shrug, which he felt to be a distinct improvement on that of the Italian friend, who happened to be small and weedy.

"Might have known what? Don't be so affected and ridiculous, Morris, giving mysterious hints that mean nothing."

"I might have known," said Morris slowly and sadly, "that you would hardly want to be interrupted in the midst of a new—enthusiasm."

His deliberate gaze round the convent parlour gave great point to the description.

Nina, too much vexed at the moment to think of any repartee to this shaft, and considerably wrought upon by conflicting emotions, saw nothing for it but to burst into tears.

"Morris, darling!" she sobbed. "I can't bear to welcome you like this. You know I'm glad to see you, my precious, precious boy. Haven't I been longing and praying for your return day and night!—but why couldn't you let me know? What is to become of you if you are always to act on impulse like this, never considering anyone or anything but yourself?"

The advantage now distinctly lay with Nina, who thus skilfully shifted the responsibility for her obvious discomposure into anxiety for her son's moral welfare.

She rapidly blinked away the drops on her long eyelashes and regained her self-command, as a glance at Morris's lowering face informed her that the shot had told.

"Well, darling, as you *have* come, there's nothing for it but to see what is convenient to these poor nuns. I don't suppose for a moment they can take you in—it's probably against all rules: and I don't know what you would do here."

"Good heavens, no!" ejaculated Morris. "I thought you'd like me to run you back in the little car, mother. You haven't seen her yet—she's a beauty."

"I don't know whether I ought to leave Frances, but"—Nina pressed her hand to her brow for a moment—"if you want me to come home, darling, I would leave it all in a moment, though as a matter of fact the Retreat is hardly begun."

"The Retreat!" ejaculated her son in tones of contempt. "No wonder you were so bored, mother."

"Yes, dear," coldly said Nina, considerably exasperated by these continual references to the plaints which now served merely to discount any lustre of sacrifice which might have surrounded her departure from the convent. "You see the Retreat had not begun when I wrote, and naturally the sort of society here is not

likely to prove particularly congenial to me. But I have to think about you now, and what is best."

Morris contrived to insert a sound of amused incredulity into the low whistle with which he received this announcement of parental solicitude. Nina, with an air of being too deeply absorbed in her considerations to spare attention elsewhere, gazed thoughtfully and with compressed lips at the small, empty fireplace in front of her, and Morris strolled to the window with a markedly *insouciant* demeanour.

Into this atmosphere of mental unrest Mère Pauline entered rapidly and noiselessly, as was her wont.

"Ah, madame!" she cried in tones of congratulation that verged upon the emotional, "quelle joie—what an answer to our poor prayers!"

Nina almost mechanically returned the pressure of Mère Pauline's hand, and murmured in accents that confusion of mind rendered almost shamefaced:

"My son, Mère Pauline. Let me present him."

"Ah!" said the nun gravely, and inclined her head in chastened recognition of the prodigal. "*Votre maman a beaucoup souffert*," was the slightly unconventional greeting which she bestowed upon him.

Nina, avoiding glancing at her son, exclaimed with feverish presence of mind: "One cannot talk *à trois* very well, can one? My plans are rather altered by this sudden arrival—you must let me discuss them with you."

"But certainly. Would Monsieur care to inspect the garden?"

"May I see to my car? She's just outside," said Morris, with the boyish smile that added an extraordinary charm to his good looks and direct blue gaze.

"Yes, by all means," said Mère Pauline, an answering smile almost involuntarily modifying the compassionate severity of her expression.

Morris made his exit.

The agitated Nina immediately burst into tears again, partly from a distinct feeling of relief, which unnerved her, and partly from a desire to gain time.

Mère Pauline said, "Ah! je comprends," nodded her

head slowly once or twice, and considerably turned her back upon the weeping Nina.

The extent of this comprehension of Mère Pauline's soon became almost overwhelmingly apparent to Mrs. Severing. The nun held her hand gently and discoursed in rapid and feeling accents of the *changement de cœur* which had evidently been operated on the returned wanderer, and of the difficult but salutary way of penance and atonement upon which he would now embark. Her references to St. Augustine and St. Monica were plentiful.

Nina, bewildered, but soothed, responded in suitably broken accents, and led the conversation round to the point of her own immediate departure.

To this Mère Pauline at once acceded. The duties of a mother came before other things, however good in themselves, and no doubt for monsieur the quiet of the country— Mère Pauline left it to be inferred that a career of debauchery such as that of Nina's son, was best expiated in as remote a corner of the earth as possible.

"I will myself explain to Father Anselm the situation," said Mère Pauline gravely, and added an inquiry as to any possible desire for an interview with the good Prior on the part of Nina or her son. She did not, however, make the suggestion in any hopeful accents, and appeared in no way surprised when it was gracefully declined on the grounds that the Prior's time must be much occupied with the Retreat.

"Then I will leave you, madame, to make your preparations of departure. Shall you require a cab?"

"My son wishes to take me back part of the way by motor—it is not such a long journey then," said Nina.

"*Ah ! les autos—les autos !*" said Mère Pauline, gravely shaking her head as she went from the parlour.

Morris's recently acquired two-seater was evidently, in the eyes of Mère Pauline, responsible for much.

"Did Frances mind your going, mother?" inquired Morris an hour later, as he drove his mother rapidly away from the convent.

An almost imperceptible start from the slight veiled

figure beside him confirmed his shrewd suspicion that his mother, thankfully hastening away from her cloistered solitude, had forgotten any formality of farewell.

But it was never Mrs. Severing's way to place herself at a disadvantage in the eyes of others, and she replied with great presence of mind:

"I couldn't make up my mind to disturb her, Morris. I know how *one* jarring note vibrates in that kind of atmosphere." An expressive turn of Nina's head left small room for doubt as to the striker of the jarring note in her own case, and Morris immediately fixed his eyes upon space.

"Look what you're doing, darling—you're not driving at all well," said Nina suavely, as the little car swerved across the road.

But although victory might lie with Nina on this occasion, she remained a victim to some mental uneasiness.

Thankfully regaining the luxurious shelter of her own house, with blazing fires and carpeted spaces in consoling contrast to the scenes of her late experiment, Mrs. Severing yet lay back in her capacious armchair that evening, and murmured disconsolately:

"I suppose Bertie will understand that in all the circumstances I couldn't very well stay on with Frances at the convent. Besides, she's perfectly happy and absorbed in it all, and it's ridiculous to suppose they can't take care of her there. I spoke about her myself to Mère Pauline."

"They'll make a nun of her, I suppose," remarked Morris.

"Well," said Nina thoughtfully, "it's a beautiful, sheltered, peaceful life—no trials, no temptations, no responsibilities. I've often wondered——" She broke off with a little sigh.

Morris poked the fire briskly, and carefully abstained from any inquiry into the subject of his mother's wonder.

"If things had been otherwise," Nina pursued with determination, "perhaps I might have sought that quiet, contemplative way myself. I have a great deal of the cloister element in me."



Morris, not in the least amused, but distinctly irritated, by his parent's pretensions to a temperament which he did not believe her to possess, assumed the appearance of one refraining from all but irrepressible mirth.

Nina compressed her lips, skilfully became several shades paler, and bade her son good-night in the low, self-controlled tones of one wounded to the quick.

The next day Mrs. Severing's considerable dramatic abilities were again called into play by the necessity of explaining to Bertha Tregaskis her desertion of Frances.

"I knew you'd want news of your child, dearest," she began fondly, "so I felt I had to come over and tell you all about everything at once."

Mrs. Tregaskis did not appear to be in the least impressed by the smoothness of this address.

"What I *don't* understand, darling," she returned with great directness, "is why *you* are back here and Francie alone at this convent place. You distinctly said that you were staying for the whole week and making the Retreat too—otherwise, as you know, I should have sent Miss Blandflower with her."

"Bertie dear," said her friend with great earnestness, "let me speak quite frankly and openly to you—of course I know I may. Don't you think it's a pity you don't *trust* your girls rather more? Take Francie now—she's perfectly well looked after where she is, and perfectly discreet and sensible. Why insist on sending someone to watch every movement and report on it? Oh, I know you don't mean it for watching—or anything of that sort—but that's probably what it looks like to the child, and it galls her. I've felt it every moment of the time that I've been with her."

"Do you mean to tell me, Nina . . . ?"

"Trust begets trust," cried Nina, in impassioned tones that affected to ignore her friend's interruption. "I've found it so with my own Morris. There's always been perfect sympathy between us, and he's never had a thought or wish that I haven't shared. I know Morris as I do myself, I may say—simply because I've always trusted—blindly, implicitly, if you will, but——"

The trenchant accents of Mrs. Tregaskis, in tones

very much deeper and louder than any at Nina's command, broke definitely into this eloquent monologue.

"Now look here, my dear. You know that I'm nothing if not direct—sledge-hammer, if you like. I can't stand shilly-shally." She planted both hands on her hips, in her favourite attitude of determination.

"Out with it, Nina. Did you ever mean to make that Retreat affair at all?"

"Bertie! I don't know what you mean by speaking to me in that magisterial tone. I am in the habit of meaning what I say. I don't suppose any woman on this earth is more *childishly* open and sincere than I am, as you very well know. Of course I meant to make the Retreat—it has been a most bitter blow to me that I was unable to finish it—but my boy's need comes before anything."

"His need of what?"

"Of me," said Nina majestically.

"How can his need of you have sprung up like a mushroom in the night?" demanded her friend in highly unbelieving accents. "A week ago you were miserable because he was wasting time and money in Paris amongst all that wretched musical crowd"—Nina felt it due to her art to draw herself up tensely at the description—"and now you expect me to believe that he can't wait quietly at Pensevern for four days till you come home."

"If Morris has suddenly realized that he has only one true friend in all the world—his mother—and turned to her again—how could she fail him?" pathetically inquired Mrs. Severing, with a distinct recollection of Mère Pauline's flights of fancy.

"Of course, my dear, if Morris has got himself into some silly scrape and come to you to be helped out, it's another thing," said Bertha unconvincedly. "I'm only too glad, for your sake, if he has turned to you at last. I know what a grief and mortification it's always been to you that you hadn't had his confidence more—foolish boy!"

"Foolish indeed!" sighed Nina. "But the young like to fancy that the elder generation does not understand—little knowing that one has been through all, all, every—

thing, that can come within their ken a hundred times over. And so my poor Morris has preferred to bestow his confidence elsewhere—and oh! how he will regret it some day.”

“As to that,” said Bertha negligently, “it’s really only a little natural kicking against the pricks of parental authority, you know. Morris used to talk to me freely enough—we had some huge pow-wows together over that silly affair about Rosamund. Boys have a knack of confiding in me. I always say that I have more young men in my train than any girl I know!”

“Not more than Hazel,” cried Nina delicately. “I hear that everyone absolutely raves about her, and she’s looking too lovely for words. Do tell me, dearest, how, how is the adorable grandson?”

If Mrs. Severing sought to repay her friend for various previous thrusts by thus alluding to the latest scion of the house of Marleswood, whose grandparents had not yet been privileged to behold him, disappointment was in store for her. Bertha did indeed reply briefly enough, “Oh, the infant flourishes magnificently, I believe,” but she added immediately, in tones that strove to be casual and not triumphant:

“Hazel is bringing him down to us next month. Her husband has to go to Holland about some property or other, and she’s coming to us while he’s away.”

“Dearest, how glad I am!”

“It will be a great joy to my old man,” said Bertha rather wistfully. “The other two girls don’t fill Hazel’s place in any way. Of course, they’re not one’s own, either, but I do sometimes wish they had a little more of Hazel’s sunshine. She was like a ray of sunshine in the house—it describes her exactly, somehow. Never out of spirits, and never had a day’s illness in her life.”

“Oh, how I envy her!” sighed Nina.

Bertie disregarded this gentle attempt to conduct the conversation into channels more interesting to Mrs. Severing.

“The house hasn’t been the same place without her laughter and fun. Poor old Minnie is always more or

less in the doleful dumps, and the two girls can't see a joke to save their lives—never could. Frances will be worse than ever now, I suppose. Tell me about this convent of hers, Nina, and what she's doing there! You were hardly there long enough to find out, I suppose?"

"My dear Bertie," said Mrs. Severing with dignity. "I really can't discuss the matter with you if you will adopt this extraordinary *pose* of thinking that I have failed you in some mysterious manner. I never undertook to do more than take Frances to the convent and settle her in, and if circumstances allowed, make the Retreat with her. As it is, they—they haven't allowed," concluded Nina rather lamely.

"So I perceive, and I really can't blame you, Nina dear. I never thought you in the least suited to that sort of place—one can't fancy you happy in such silent, austere surroundings," Bertha said affectionately. "But the question is, whether I'm to let my little girl stay on alone, or send Minnie down to join her—or I might even go myself."

"I'm sure you'd be like a fish out of water, darling! Don't dream of it. The whole thing is *such* an atmosphere of 'Plain living and high thinking,'" cried Nina.

Bertha laughed good-humouredly.

"The very doctrine I'm always preaching myself! so I don't know why you should think it wouldn't suit me. But, as a matter of fact, I don't quite see how I could get away just now—I've a committee meeting to-morrow, and the Mothers' Union coming here on Saturday—and I want to keep an eye on that child of Farmer Trigg's. I'm pretty sure the parents are letting it go to chapel with some of the Dissenters' children."

Nina looked profoundly bored.

"Surely that's a matter for the parson, my dear."

"If I didn't tell the parson whose children are Church and whose Chapel," cried Bertha warmly, "I don't believe he'd ever find out. He's over seventy, and as blind as a bat. It's a perfect shame he doesn't resign—as I said to the Bishop——"

Nina had heard her friend discourse before upon the deficiencies of that friend's spiritual pastor and master and felt no slightest interest in the subject. So she exclaimed with an air of sudden inspiration:

"Bertie! Forgive me for interrupting you, darling—it doesn't mean that I'm not interested, for I am, and I *entirely* think with you—but I've just had an idea. There's quite a nice woman at the convent, to whom I should have recommended Frances most particularly, if only I hadn't been in such a hurry, with simply no time to think of anything. But if I sent her one line——"

Nina's pause implied boundless devotion on the part of the quite nice woman.

"Is she a Sister?" asked Bertie, not unsuspiciously.

"Dear me, no, nothing of that sort. Just making the Retreat, like myself," said Nina vaguely. "A Mrs. Mulholland—rather a talker, but *quite* to be depended on, I should think."

"Well," said Bertha doubtfully. "It would be very inconvenient to let Minnie go just now, and she'd hate it, poor thing. And I suppose the child is all right really—it's only that one's old-fashioned notions don't like the idea of her being there under nobody's charge but her own."

"I'll write to-night," said Nina effusively, "and put her under Mrs. Mulholland's charge. I quite meant to do it when I found myself obliged to rush away, but something prevented it at the last moment. Don't dream of worrying for an instant, dearest."

"I don't worry, as you know. I'm a practical woman, Nina," said Bertha bluntly. "Just write a line to this friend of yours, then, will you? and it can go to the post with the letters at once."

Mrs. Severing had hardly contemplated so prompt an action, but she was relieved at shifting the onus of her responsibility so lightly, and sat down willingly enough to transfer it on to the substantial shoulders of Mrs. Mulholland.

Two days later she triumphantly confronted Mrs. Tregaskis with the reply.

"Why four pages!" curtly demanded Bertha, elevating her eyebrows.

"She gives me many little convent details which would hardly, of course, interest an outsider, but which mean something to me," said Mrs. Severing, with the air of a lady-abbess.

"May I read it?"

"I can read you the bit which refers to Frances."

"Dear me, is it private! After two days' acquaintance! I always say, Nina, that you dash into intimacies quicker than any woman I've ever known."

"How preposterous you are, Bertie. Of course there's nothing private in Mrs. Mulholland's letter. I merely thought it might bore you. Please do read it, if you are so insatiably curious. It always amuses me to see the delightful way in which you poke and ferret about into everything, like a beloved bloodhound."

"Bloodhounds don't ferret," remarked Mrs. Tregaskis, taking Mrs. Mulholland's voluminous epistle from her friend's hand with an air of great annoyance.

The air of annoyance was merged into astonishment, not unmingled with amusement, as she perused the four large pages covered with thick, black writing:

"THE CONVENT,  
"Friday.

"MY DEAR MRS. SEVERING,

"You must forgive me not answering your little note at once, but we only came out of Retreat this morning. I was sorry to hear of your sudden departure, and also not to have said good-bye, but perhaps we shall see you down here again one of these days. Your little friend has been very happy, and has edified us all during the Retreat. I am sure she must be very pleasing to our dear Lord. I hear that the Prior is very much pleased with her indeed, and hopes to receive her very soon now. What a joy that must be to you! since I could not help feeling, dear Mrs. Severing, that you were very much with us *in spirit*.

"Mère Pauline has told me of the great joy which has come to you in your dear son's return, and you must

please accept my very warmest congratulations. There may still be dark days ahead of you, but *while there's life there's hope.*

"Miss Grantham will no doubt write to you of the Retreat. It was quite beautiful, and the discourse this morning which came before the bestowal of the Papal Blessing was most moving. I feel that we have all derived great benefit and many graces, and you may be sure that I remembered my promise to say many a little prayer for you *and yours.*

"Mère Pauline sends many kind thoughts, and will not forget you in her good prayers. And now, with most earnest wishes for the future, dear Mrs. Severing, I must close.

"Most cordially yours,

"MARY-TH. MULHOLLAND,  
"B. de M."

Bertha returned the letter without a word to its owner. But the goaded Mrs. Severing was not yet free to take her departure from Porthlew.

She was waylaid in the very hall by Rosamund.

"Wretched child!" thought Nina, who had by this time educated herself into thinking of Miss Grantham solely as the destroyer of Morris's peace of mind. "However, I suppose she's miserable by this time, and wants to know if there's any chance of patching up a meeting or something with him."

With this in mind, Mrs. Severing advanced with an air of guilelessness, and a sense of diplomacy.

"I'm just off, dear," she said sweetly to Rosamund.

"Your beloved guardian has really tempted me to stay on longer than I ought—it is such a joy to spend an hour with her."

"I won't keep you one minute," said Rosamund, "but I had to ask you—I do so want to hear . . ."

Nina's expressive eyebrows mounted.

"About Frances," said Rosamund eagerly, quite unaware that she was disconcerting the diplomatic Mrs. Severing considerably. The shock of finding her discernment at fault, almost equally with her annoyance at

being once more asked to render an account of her shifted responsibilities, caused Mrs. Severing to reply with considerably less than her usual suavity:

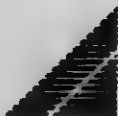
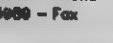
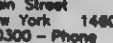
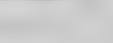
"Frances! What about her! I've left her in charge of a most delightful woman, and she's perfectly happy. Just as the young," said Nina viciously, "always are."





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## XVI

SHREWD as Mrs. Tregaskis was, it was not until after Nina had departed, serene and triumphant, that she suddenly exclaimed, pondering over the ingenuous epistle of Mrs. Mulholland:

"It's all very well, but that woman never answered one word about looking after Frances. She wrote about everything else under the sun, but not a single definite assurance in the whole caboodle. What an unpractical lot these holy females are! It's enough to drive a plain common-sense Cornish body to distraction."

She laughed in humorous deprecation of her own harassed tones, and Miss Blandflower remarked sympathetically:

"Fancy that, now. Dear Mrs. Tregaskis, wouldn't you like me to join the fray? I could run down there, have a look at our Francesca, and trot back to report progress. Or bring her home in my pocket."

Bertha looked at her proposed deputy with rather a doubtful expression.

"You'd hate it, Minnie, wouldn't you? The very bosom of the Scarlet Woman, you know!"

"England expects every man to do his duty," replied Miss Blandflower courageously, but she looked infinitely relieved when Mrs. Tregaskis laughed again, and said tolerantly:

"No, no, Minnie, I don't think we'll expose you to contamination. If anyone goes, I'll go myself—but we'll see what the next letters are like."

The next letters, however, from the Porthlew point of view, were far from satisfactory.

"This tone of little Frances' won't do at all," declared Bertha very decidedly, at breakfast. "Quite a new departure! Talking about being 'received into the Church at once,' and 'discussing further plans' when she

gets home. I never heard of such a thing—what are little girls coming to, pray?"

"What are little girls made of? Sugar and spice and all that's nice," muttered Minnie in the inward voice which she reserved for her frequent and irrelevant quotations.

"Nice, indeed!" retorted Mrs. Tregaskis crisply, "anything but, my poor Minnie. This won't do at all. Miss Frances must be popped back into her little place again, I'm afraid. You needn't scowl at me, Rosamund. Nobody is going to be at all unkind or brutal, but if this is the effect that Roman Catholicism is going to have on Frances, why, the sooner she's taken away from the convent the better. In any case I never gave her leave to stay for more than the few days' Retreat, and now she writes quite calmly that she is to be 'received' at the end of the week, without so much as with your leave or by your leave."

"If she's made up her mind, Bertha—and I conclude that she has—you can't stop her, and you'd better leave her alone," growled Frederick.

"Nonsense, dear. She's not so emancipated as all that, yet. Besides, we *have* given a sort of consent, in a way, by letting her go to this place—though it was against my better judgment, as you know."

"Your better judgment, Bertha, is only less to be relied on than your original impulse."

Mrs. Tregaskis invariably treated these speeches of her lord and master as a recondite form of pleasantry. She therefore laughed valiantly at the epigrammatic insult, and merely told Minnie to give her the marmalade.

"Ma-me-laid, as the chicken said," lugubriously and quite absent-mindedly remarked Miss Blandflower, neither she nor anyone else paying the slightest heed to the historic jest, which she repeated almost every morning of her life.

"Well," Bertha said at last, "I suppose I must sacrifice the poor Mothers' Union and trot after my stray lamb. I've a very good mind to pay her a surprise visit, and see what she's really up to."

"Frances would never deceive you, Cousin Bertie," indignantly said Rosamund.

"I dare say, my dear; but Frances is with people whom I know very little about, and I can't tell what nonsense they may be stuffing into her little head. Anyway, I'm going to find out."

"Better send Rosamund," was the observation of her Cousin Frederick, uttered in tones which conveyed at one and the same time the impressions that he was making the suggestion sarcastically, and that he knew it would be displeasing to his wife.

Rosamund looked at Mrs. Tregaskis. She had not the slightest expectation of accompanying her to the convent, and was not even sure that she wanted to do so.

"Rubbish," said Mrs. Tregaskis briskly. "No use glowering at me, Rosamund. You'd be dreadfully in my way, darling, and in Frances', too, little though you may believe it. She's never quite natural and open when you're there to try and tell her what she must say and what she mustn't."

This observation, partly from the substratum of truth which it contained, always roused in Rosamund a fury of pain and resentment.

She told herself vehemently that Cousin Bertie never understood anything, and hated the quick, angry flush that denoted her feelings plainly to that amused, observant eye.

Her retaliation she knew, with all the impotent anger of youth at its own inadequacy, to be as awkward and ineffectual as it was fierce.

"I shall certainly write and tell Francie that you are coming, Cousin Bertie."

"Oho! You think she wouldn't appreciate a surprise visit, is that it? It doesn't speak very well for your theory that Frances would never deceive me, does it?" laughed Bertha. "Very well, my dear, write to her by all means, and say that I'll be there on Saturday. I can't possibly get away to-morrow."

"Dear me, no," said Minnie anxiously. "There's your dairy class in the morning, and then Nurse Watkins wants to come and talk to you about that poor woman with the twins, and isn't it the third Friday of the month?"

because that's your committee meeting out at Polwerrow, isn't it?"

"Yes, I shall have my hands full. You'll have to take the mothers on Saturday afternoon, Minnie. I'll give you the leaflets to distribute, and they must have tea as usual, and you or Rosamund might read them a little something afterwards. I'll look out something or other that will do."

"They'll be dreadfully disappointed at not seeing you," sighed Miss Blandflower.

"Tell them how sorry I am to be away. It's not often I've missed one of the meetings, is it? The fact is, it does me good to talk to them all and hear all about baby's croup and Old Man Granfer's rheumatism and the rest of it. I revel in a gude old clackit o' wummin, as we say down here."

"They all adore you," said the faithful Minnie.

"Rubbish, my dear! It's only that one has a knack of understanding them, and then they've known me all my life. Why, I'm still 'Miss Bertie' to most of them!"

Bertha laughed, finished her breakfast, and told Minnie to come and help her get ready for the dairy class.

Helping Mrs. Tregaskis never meant anything else than the more mechanical jobs that she herself had not time to undertake, but Minnie followed her obediently, and spent the intervening time until Saturday toiling blindly and ineffectively in her wake.

"I'm so dreadfully afraid that I shall forget something or other," she sighed, watching Mrs. Tregaskis drive away from the hall door. "I've not got her head for organization, you know. Ah well! it takes all sorts to make a world, as they say."

It must be admitted that Miss Blandflower's distrust of her own capability as a substitute was not unshared by Mrs. Tregaskis.

"Poor old Minnie! She always does her best," Bertha said to her husband as he drove her to the station. "But I'm afraid there'll be a big accumulation by the time I get back. However, it's all in the day's work, and the main point just now is to see what Frances is up to."

Frederick remained silent, and she added hastily:

"Now, not another word till we get to the station. I've promised myself the luxury of this quiet half-hour to go over the blanket-club accounts."

She pulled out of her bag a little red notebook and was immersed in figures until they reached the station.

Nor did Mrs. Tregaskis' activities cease when she had established herself in the corner-seat of a third-class railway-carriage.

There was a woman seated opposite to her whose baby was fractious and crying, and only howled the louder at Bertha's kind, broad smiles and dangled watch-chain. She gave the mother a few words of advice as to its feeding, and laughed away her stammered apologies at the baby's ungracious reception of the lady's kindness.

At the first stop a young girl whom Mrs. Tregaskis knew by sight as the daughter of a distant farmer, got into the carriage, her head muffled in a shawl, and immediately shut both windows with a timid, "Excuse me—I have the toothache."

"No, no, no!" cried Bertha with jovial decision, and lowering the window furthest from the girl's swollen face. "Sit over there, Nellie, and you won't feel it. It is Nellie Jewell, isn't it?"

"Yes, Mrs. Tregaskis."

"Well, Nellie, I'm very sorry you've got toothache, but we're—let me see—one, two, three, *four* people in here beside yourself! Five, if we count this little man," she added, with a laughing nod at the unresponsive baby, "and I don't see why he shouldn't have his share of fresh air. You wouldn't want five people to do without God's lovely fresh air that's so good for us all, just because you've got toothache, Nellie?"

"I don't want to catch cold in 'un, Mrs. Tregaskis," muttered the girl sullenly.

But she left the window open.

Presently Mrs. Tregaskis asked her if she'd been to the dentist.

"Yes, Mrs. Tregaskis. I'm just on my way back. But her couldn't do nothin' for me while 'tis swollen-like."

"No, I see that. You silly girl, you ought to have gone before it got so bad. If only you girls ate fewer sweets, you wouldn't have such bad teeth—but at any rate, if you *must* give yourself toothache, you ought to be brave and go to see the dentist before getting to this stage. Now I don't suppose you've been able to do much towards helping your mother for the last week, have you, with your mouth in that state?"

"No, Mrs. Tregaskis."

There was a suspicion of a flounce in Nellie Jewell's movements as she rose to get out at the next station.

"Good-bye, Nellie. I hope you'll have had that tooth right out next time I see you," said Bertha, with unperturbed good-humour.

She made a mental note to the effect that she must call on Nellie Jewell's mother when she got back and see if they couldn't persuade the girl to become an Associate of the G.F.S. She seemed to be a silly girl, but no doubt something could be done for her.

For the rest of the journey Mrs. Tregaskis dismissed parochial concerns from her mind, and allowed herself the luxury of an uninterrupted hour's reading of "*La vie des Abeilles*." She enjoyed, quite consciously, the sense that this was the first time she had had spare time in which to read it at leisure during the six months she had had the book in hand.

The journey was a long one, and packets of sandwiches were produced on either side of her, but Mrs. Tregaskis always grudged time given to food, and only at the last junction put her head out of the window and allowed herself to drink two cups of very strong tea from the station refreshment-room.

It was nearly six o'clock before she reached, by means of the slowest of cabs, the convent door.

She looked at the unimposing building, high and narrow like the buildings on either side of it, with some contempt. It was not at all picturesque, like the charming convents or monasteries of her experience in Italy and Southern France. Only a modest brass plate on the door and a blue and white figure cut out of what used to be called "transparencies" and pasted against the



inside of the glass fanlight, proclaimed the house to be a convent.

Once inside, however, Bertha thought that her surroundings left small room for doubt. The small, dark parlour was hung with highly-coloured devotional pictures, a cheap coloured statuette stood on the mantelpiece and another one on a bracket over the door.

Contrary to the conventual wont, however, Mrs. Tregaskis was not kept waiting. Frances came into the room almost immediately. She did not greet her guardian with any of the timidity which she often displayed, and which Mrs. Tregaskis had half expected.

"Cousin Bertie, I am so glad you've come! It was so good of you to take all this journey, and it'll be so much easier to talk than to write—you know how bad I am at letters."

"Your last letter was rather explicit, Francie, my child," said Bertha drily. "We'll have a long talk about it all to-morrow, but just at present I want to know whether these good nuns are expecting me. I suppose you asked them if I could have a room?"

"Yes. You've got the one Mrs. Severing had. You see, the Retreat was over two or three days ago, so most of the visitors have gone. There are only the usual lady boarders left now."

"The Retreat was over two or three days ago, was it? I see."

Frances flushed at her guardian's tone.

"Oh, Cousin Bertie, if Rosamund hadn't said that you were coming here I meant to have written you a long letter, and told you why I was staying on, and everything."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Tregaskis, still drily. "I hope you did. I feel sure you did. Now show me where my room is, will you?"

Frances, the look of pleasure on her face altogether dashed, preceded Mrs. Tregaskis to the room next to her own.

Mrs. Tregaskis, as usual, was appreciative and observant, was charmed at having a window that looked

out on to the garden, and thanked Frances delightedly for the little vase of flowers arranged upon the tiny dressing-table. Frances reflected remorsefully that Cousin Bertie never failed in recognition of any effort, however small, to give her pleasure. Joined to the thought, however, was the subconscious conviction that neither did Cousin Bertie ever fail to mark and remember any infringement, however trivial, of the wide, easy, and yet inflexible discipline which she was apt to wield over all her surroundings.

It was perhaps this unacknowledged certainty which drove Frances, as soon as breakfast was over on the following morning, to withdraw herself and her guardian, with unwonted decision, from the voluble overtures of Mrs. Mulholland, to the comparative privacy of the small garden. It was only nine o'clock, and they both shivered a little in the raw morning air.

"Tut! This won't do," exclaimed Bertha. "Come along, Francie—in step, now."

She began to chant with a sort of martial ardour, keeping time as she stepped out gallantly:

"I had a good place and I ~~left—left—left~~; I'm out of work now and it serves me jolly well ~~right—right—right~~! Soon be warm at this rate! Don't shiver like that, Francie. Why, bless me! it's good to be alive on a day like this."

Frances was guiltily conscious that her shivers were not altogether due to defective circulation.

She made a great effort, clenching her small fists unseen, and said valiantly:

"Cousin Bertie, you know that I'm staying on here because I want to be received as a Catholic next week. They are—quite willing."

She felt uncomfortably breathless, and her voice caught in her throat once or twice.

None of Hazel's valour in opposition would ever be Frances'.

Bertha's voice was most reassuringly kind.

"Well, darling, we must talk it over a little bit. Why so much haste?"

"I—I don't quite know what there is to wait for,"

faltered Frances, conscious of the lack of conviction in her voice.

That Cousin Bertie was also conscious of it was evident in the tone of smooth good-humour in which she replied:

"I might perhaps answer that you could wait to be a little older and wiser and more experienced, or that later on you may reproach me bitterly for having allowed you to take a decisive step in a fit of enthusiasm."

"Oh no!" breathed Frances.

"Oh yes!" cried Bertha cheerfully. "I can assure you that people *do* change their minds, astonishing though it may seem to you, my darling, and that even ten years hence you'll feel quite differently about nearly everything under the sun. Tell me, don't you see for yourself that you've changed a good deal since you were a little girl of fourteen or fifteen, even? Aren't almost all your opinions, and values, and ambitions quite different?"

Frances reflected conscientiously and then replied rather timidly:

"No, Cousin Bertie. I don't think they are."

Bertha broke into her ringing laugh, her head flung back.

"Oh, my dear little girl! You're even younger than I thought you were. It's a shame to laugh at you when you're so much in earnest—but you'll laugh at yourself in a very little while. Oh, Francie, Francie!"

She laughed again, irrepressibly.

At last she became serious.

"Now, Frances, bar all joking. Tell me exactly why you want to join the Catholic Church."

Frances noted gratefully that her guardian, speaking to her of the Catholic Church, did not use the prefix "Roman."

She gave a stammering, halting summary of reasons, which sounded curiously unconvincing even to her own ears, for wishing to become a Catholic as soon as possible. Even the attentive silence, punctuated by quiet movements of the head, in which Bertha listened to her, seemed to add to the sense of pitiful inadequacy overwhelming her.

She knew that her uneloquent, shakily-spoken sentences gave no hint of the passionate convictions and determinations seething within her.

"Will you talk to Father Anselm—the Prior, you know—or to Mère Pauline?" she ended desperately.

"Certainly I will," said Bertha promptly. "I had already meant to do so, my child, since these people have taken a very big responsibility on themselves in persuading you to leave your own Church before you're even old enough to know what you're doing. They've got to render a very strict account of it to me, too."

"Cousin Bertie, there's one thing," said Frances, flushing scarlet. "By rights, the Catholic Church *ought* to be my own Church because my mother was one, and if—if the rules and thin had been as strict then as they are now, Rosamund and I would have *had* to be baptized Catholics."

Bertha responded instantly:

"That's quite true, Francis, and it's because of that, and because we know that your dear mother belonged to that Faith, that Cousin Frederick and I are allowing you so much latitude. You see, darling, if *Hazel* had taken this turn, we should have forbidden it outright until she was at least twenty-one—but it's not quite the same thing where you're concerned."

"Oh, Cousin Bertie, how kind and understanding you are!"

"Ah, the dull old people with Experience behind them do sometimes understand, don't they?" asked Bertha playfully. "Well, now, what about a chat with the Reverend Mother Superior and all these good people? Can I see any of them?"

"I expect so," said Frances, glad to think that her cause should be transferred to better hands than her own. They went indoors again.

## XVII

"LET me speak," earnestly said Mrs. Mulholland. Unnecessarily.

No one could have stopped her.

Bertha Tregaskis did not attempt to, but listened with a broad, if rather fixed smile, and an impatient foot tapping the floor with sharp, irregular beats.

Regardless of the fact that it was Sunday evening, and that Mrs. Mulholland's hands were locked, severely unoccupied, in her ample lap, Bertha was knitting vigorously.

She had had a day of interviews, in which it seemed to her that the Prior of Twickenham's bland assumption of a knowledge of the world which he obviously did not possess was only less provoking than Mère Pauline's austere conviction that *le bon Dieu* alone was conducting the *affaire Frances* and was not, and never had been, in receipt of extraneous aid from even the most chosen of His instruments.

Smilingly refusing to take these or similar assertions in any way for granted, Bertha had nevertheless made small headway against the unescapable fact that Frances, and that potent agent, Frances' conscience, were arrayed against her.

Vexed in spirit, but still indomitable, she had fallen a victim, at the end of the day, to the assiduous pursuit of the zealous Mrs. Mulholland.

"*La mère des dames pensionnaires*," was her emotional introduction of herself, spoken with an atrocious accent.

"That's what our lay-sisters here all call me, you know. The mother of the lady boarders. That's what it means: the mother of the lady boarders."

Bertha smiled.

"*La mère des dames pensionnaires*," she repeated, less

because she was impressed by the title than in order that her French pronunciation should make it evident how extremely unnecessary Mrs. Mulholland's translation had been.

"That's it, my dear—excuse me calling you so—that's it. I see you understand French as well as I do myself. I always say that's one of the advantages of living with a French community, as I do—one gets to know the language as though it was one's own. Quite a French order, ours is, you know—founded by a Frenchwoman, Mam'selle Simone Vergy de Lange, in Paris. Ah, poor Paris! No convents there now, you know, Mrs. Tregaskis."

"No, alas! Even when I was last there, about ten years ago, it——"

"Terribly sad, terribly sad," interrupted Mrs. Mulholland; "but it'll bring a judgment on the country. Mark my words, it'll bring a judgment. All those flourishing Orders scattered and sent into exile—they can't feel it anything but exile, you know—there they are, all over the place."

Mrs. Tregaskis cleared her throat resolutely.

"A good many of them have found hospitality here in England," she began firmly.

"Ah, yes, yes, yes. A blessing in disguise for this poor Protestant country—that's what I always feel. Who knows what it may lead to? I dare say it's largely for England's sake that all this terrible persecution has been allowed, and then in return for the charity and hospitality they've received, these good monks and nuns will help to spread the Faith."

"I am not a Roman Catholic," said Mrs. Tregaskis.

She might have omitted the "Roman" but for her certainty of Mrs. Mulholland's complete invulnerability.

In effect, Mrs. Mulholland merely retorted in unabashed assent:

"Quite so, quite so. You'll excuse me saying that I was already aware of that, Mrs. Tregaskis, quite aware of it. But I always say just what I think—no respecter of persons, so to speak. Say what you think and think what you say is my motto—always has been."

Mrs. Tregaskis felt rather as though she were listening to a caricature of herself.

"Now I dare say you have a prejudice against religious orders—many people have, I know—quite good people, mind you, who only need a little enlightenment."

"On the contrary, I can assure——"

"Never mind, never mind!" cried Mrs. Mulholland with breezy inattention. "I know all about it, and you must remember that I'm a woman of the world, Mrs. Tregaskis, though I do live in a convent, and can see your point of view as well as ours. It's all quite natural, and I can assure you that a great many people have felt just as you do. Especially about foreign Orders—French and the like, you know. Not got quite our ideas about fresh air, for instance, or a daily bath—that sort of thing."

Bertha drew a deep breath.

"I dare say not," she said in a louder voice than usual, "but I've had plenty of truck with convents and the like in my time, you know—in Italy, and so on. Naturally, one has no insular prejudices of an early Victorian kind, after knocking about the world as I've done."

She laughed heartily, but briefly, being well aware that any opening would be seized upon by Mrs. Mulholland to make her own voice heard once more.

"Now, you must forgive me, but I must go and hunt up my chick-a-biddy. I don't know where the child's got to since supper."

"Now, my dear Mrs. Tregaskis, listen to me, and let that child alone. Let her alone, I say," commanded Mrs. Mulholland, in accents of authority such as had never been addressed to the astonished Bertha since her schooldays.

Mrs. Tregaskis drew herself up to the full of her very considerable height, looked Mrs. Mulholland up and down with an expression of astounded contempt, and rose without a word from her seat. Upon which Mrs. Mulholland, with surprising and most unexpected agility, rose also, and planted her enormous bulk against the closed door of the small parlour.

"Now, listen to me," was her superfluous injunction as she and Mrs. Tregaskis stood facing one another, at a distance of about two yards apart. "You'll think me very strange, I dare say"—Bertha's face showed the absolute correctness of this supposition—"very strange, perhaps. But what people think doesn't matter to me, Mrs. Tregaskis. We've got to trample human respect underfoot in a matter like this. I shouldn't feel that I was doing my duty if I didn't speak out. You may say it's no business of mine, but Miss Grantham has talked to me—very fully, I may say, on the whole—and so's Mère Pauline. That child wishes to be received into the Church, Mrs. Tregaskis."

"I see no reason for discussing the subject with you," said Bertha, thoroughly incensed, and ignoring the very tangible reason in front of her. "Kindly let me pass out of that door."

But the person who is hampered by the instincts of good breeding is at a disadvantage when dealing with an antagonist prepared serenely to ignore even the more elementary canons of behaviour. It did not occur to Bertha, resolute as she was, to launch herself bodily upon the sturdy old woman who stood in front of the door and force a way past her. Still less did it occur to her that Mrs. Mulholland would continue to maintain her spread-eagle attitude the more defiantly for this very forbearance.

But no trifling considerations for the ethics of good taste were ever destined to stand in Mrs. Mulholland's way.

Her massive bulk against the door, her large hands gesticulating emphatically, she freed her mind in hoarse, vehement accents that completely overpowered the spasmodic attempts of her audience to interrupt her.

"I know very well that Mère Pauline's been talking to you, and that good holy Prior. But there it is, people in the world look upon priests and nuns as impractical—they won't listen. But I tell you, Mrs. Tregaskis, speaking as one woman who's seen life to another, that if ever there was a case of absolute genuine conversion, it's that child—that ward of yours, or whatever she is. If you withhold her from the true Light, out of worldly con-



sideration or any other motive, you'll be doing a most serious wrong, Mrs. Tregaskis—a most serious wrong. I'm all for obedience and discipline, as a rule. 'If you don't obey,' I say, 'you'll never know how to command,' is what I say. But if little Miss Grantham comes to me for advice, I shall tell her just what I think."

"Kindly let me——"

"Just what I think. She must go straight ahead and follow her conscience in spite——"

The door-handle turned from outside.

"Who is there?" almost shouted Mrs. Mulholland in truculent accents.

"It is I. Mère Pauline."

The small, trenchant voice fell like a douche of cold water on the agitation within. Mrs. Mulholland, in some strange way, seemed to Bertha to crumple up under the severely inquiring gaze of the little French Superior.

"What is all this?"

"A most unjustifiable piece of interference on the part of this person," said Mrs. Tregaskis, in no uncertain accents. "She appears to think herself called upon to give me advice about the child I've brought up."

The corners of Mère Pauline's little mouth closed more firmly, and she turned an inquiring gaze through her spectacles on to Mrs. Mulholland, whose face was now suffused. She had the angry, confused aspect of a child detected in naughtiness.

"Well, well, ma Mère, I may have exceeded my rights a little in what I said. I know very well I'm apt to get excited when it's a question of gaining a soul for God——"

"I think you 'ave exceeded them very considerably," said Mère Pauline with perfect candour. "It was not your business."

The mighty bulk of Mrs. Mulholland seemed to droop under the icy accents of the little Superior.

She gulped loudly two or three times, and then said very humbly, and with obvious effort, to Mrs. Tregaskis:

"Then I hope you'll excuse me. I—I hope you'll forgive me, Mrs. Tregaskis. I'm afraid my interference may have done more harm than good."

"Say no more about it," said Bertha bluntly. "I quite understand."

She was astounded at the sudden change operated in the redoubtable Mrs. Mulholland, and when the old woman had gone heavily and dejectedly from the room she told Mère Pauline so frankly.

"Oui, oui," said the imperturbable Superior dispassionately. "Elle a beaucoup de vertu, beaucoup d'humilité, la pauvre. One word is enough. She is very good, in spite of that tongue."

"Now, is that the effect of her religion—the humility, I mean, not the tongue?"

"But yes, madame, naturally. What else should make her own herself in the wrong, like a child that is scolded? The Catholic religion teaches nothing if not the practice of humility in everyday life."

"Upon my word," cried Bertha, half laughing, "if I thought it would have that effect upon Frances, she should do as she liked to-morrow."

It was perhaps the strategical opening for which she had subconsciously been waiting in order to effect a graceful retreat from a position of resistance rapidly growing untenable.

At all events Frances found that her guardian offered no further definite opposition to her wishes.

"Mind you, my child, I don't approve of what you're doing," Bertha told her gravely, "but neither your Cousin Frederick nor I wish to forbid it definitely. As you know, I'm not very much bound by any creed myself, so perhaps I don't attach as much importance to your leaving the Church of England as other people may. So long as we all keep as straight as we can and play the game it doesn't seem to me to matter very much what we call ourselves. So I'm going to leave you free to make your own choice, my little Francie."

"I wish you didn't mind—I wish I hadn't got to make you unhappy," said Frances in tears.

Bertha kissed her.

"My poor little girl, I wish I'd never let these people get hold of you and your poor little conscience."

Frances immediately drew herself away, colouring.

"What! Mustn't I even criticize them?" said Bertha, half sadly, half playfully. "Fathers and mothers get left alone in the old nest very quickly, when the young birds first find their wings, Francie. You'll find that out one day."

Frances told herself, with a quick pang of compassion, that Cousin Bertie was thinking as much of Hazel as of her.

"It won't make any difference," she faltered anxiously, hardly knowing what she said. "At least——"

"Ah! At least——" said Bertha, laughing a little.

"Well, my Francie, you're joining the Church into which your mother was born, and I hope with all my heart that you'll find all you expect there. And your old heretic guardian will be in a corner in the chapel when you're received, praying for whatever is best for you."

The ceremony of Frances' reception into the Catholic Church took place quietly in the convent chapel a day or two later.

Only Bertha Tregaskis and one or two members of the Community were present, but before the brief ceremony was over Mrs. Mulholland creaked in, with elaborate gestures of silence, sank upon her knees in the bench beside Bertha, and turned upon her a smile in which triumph and compassion were strangely blended.

"The deed is done," wrote Bertha that evening, in a hasty scrawl addressed to Miss Blandflower. "The child seems happy, and I hope she'll settle down after this. Everyone goes through some sort of youthful crisis, and I have a great belief in getting it over early. We shall be back on Friday, after a night spent with Hazel in London. One hint, Minnie, before I finish this scribble—treat Frances just as though nothing had happened, won't you? The excitement is over now, and I don't want her to go on brooding over it, and thinking her own little affairs of enormous importance to the world in general. The best thing now is to let her settle quietly down to everyday life again."

In the days that immediately ensued, however, Mrs. Tregaskis saw with satisfaction that this aspiration appeared likely to be realized.

Frances was calmly, silently happy.

She was more affectionate towards her guardian than she had ever shown herself before, as though to demonstrate that no added difference should join itself to that new, deeper one of which she was more conscious than was Bertha.

There was also much less exaggeration in her devotion to her new creed than Mrs. Tregaskis had expected. Beyond attending the daily Mass, as did all the lady boarders, and spending a little while in the chapel every evening, Frances appeared willing to spend the whole of the day in Bertha's company, a certain radiant serenity of outlook that now encompassed her making her a charming companion.

She was delighted at the prospect of staying for one evening with Hazel before the return journey to Cornwall, and when, on the eve of departure, Bertha asked rather curiously whether she minded leaving the convent, Frances replied with a surprised look:

"No, not really. Not a bit. I hope I shall see them again one day, and you won't mind my writing to Mère Pauline from time to time, will you, Cousin Bertie?"

Bertha looked at her sharply.

A desire to test the reality of the steadfast-seeming happiness that shone from the eyes of her ward made her say, rather courtly:

"I don't know, dear. Why this necessity for correspondence?"

"I'd like to write to her, that's all; but, of course, not if you don't want me to," said Frances placidly.

Bertha laughed, her good-humour suddenly restored.

"You can write if you want to, within reason. You are not generally a good correspondent, Frances."

And Frances said calmly that no, she was afraid she wasn't, except, perhaps, as regarded Rosamund.

Evidently the crisis was over, thought Bertha, not without relief. There might come a reaction later on, but with that she could trust herself to cope when at Porthlew.

They left the convent amid a crowd of auguries and farewells.

"Vous nous reviendrez, ma petite," the Superior said as she embraced Frances, and her voice had all the authority of an assertion of fact.

"Oui, ma Mère," said Frances timidly. She was always shy of speaking French, especially in front of her guardian, who was apt to jeer good-humouredly at the schoolroom *lingua-franca* of her wards.

"*Mais oui, mais oui !*" cried Bertha heartily. "*A bientôt tout le monde !*" In the universal benevolence which always pervades the welcome hour of departure from a boring sojourn, she even added cordially:

"*Vous nous reverrez l'année prochaine !*"

In the cab which was to take them to the station, the last wave exchanged between Frances and the substantial form of old Mrs. Mulholland, who stood agitating her arms like a semaphore in the convent doorway, Frances turned inquiringly to her guardian.

"Do you really think we shall come back next year, Cousin Bertie? Did you mean for the Retreat?"

"Perhaps, Francie. If you're very keen about it. We'll see."

"Oh," said Frances, with a sudden and most unusual effusion, "you *are* so kind to me, Cousin Bertie. I don't feel I can ever be grateful enough to you. I wish I need never—never do anything but just what you liked!"

Bertha was amazed, and also rather touched.

She laid her hand kindly on Frances'.

"Well, my dear little girl, that depends on yourself, doesn't it? But you've always been a good child, my Francie, and I know the poor little conscience is responsible for *most* of our differences of opinion, eh?"

She laughed a little.

"As long as you're good and happy, that's all I want, my darling. One only lives for the younger generation, you know, as one goes on. Hazel—and Hazel's child, and, I hope, some day, your children and Rosamund's—that's all I care about."

"I'm so glad we're going to Hazel now," said Frances sympathetically.

Bertha squeezed her hand suddenly.

"Oh, my dear, think of it! To see her with a baby of her own—to see little Richard Frederick at last!"

She stopped abruptly, as though afraid of her own emotion.

Frances reflected rather mournfully that Cousin Bertie saw pathetically little of her daughter nowadays. On the causes which had led to that estrangement she preferred not to dwell. She had known very little of the difficulties surrounding Hazel's marriage, and the subject was never discussed at Porthlew. Perhaps Frances, innocent and affectionate, and looking upon Hazel as a sister only less dear to her than Rosamund, unconsciously shrank from applying the standards of her new-found creed to the position held by the second Lady Marleswood.

She had by her a letter from Rosamund that added to her happiness. Her sister had written:

"I do understand, Francie, and I can't help being glad that you are a Catholic at last. Cousin Frederick has been nicer about it than you would have supposed. It was he who told Cousin Bertie that as things were they had no right to forbid you, and he suddenly asked me last night if you were happy. So I said you were. Unluckily, Miss Blandflower was in the room, and said it was a case of live and let live, or something of that sort, and you know how angry she always makes him, so he said nothing more. As a matter of fact, I think that live and let live is rather what Cousin Frederick would like to do . . . and that's what made him say you were to do as you liked. As for me, I'm so thankful you really are happy about it all. I think the convent sounds nice, and Mrs. Mulholland. I wish I could see her, and thank her for being so nice to you. Some day, dearest, when we can go back home to the Wye Valley and live together, we can ask her to come and stay, can't we? After all, it may not be so very far off, now I am so nearly of age."

Frances felt very happy as she gazed from the train window, dreamily absorbed in her own thoughts. The Retreat, the sense of illumination vouchsafed her, the directions and instructions received from Father Analem, and the present joy of knowing herself in the Church

where she had longed to be, filled her mind. She did not want to think of the future. If there was a lurking sense of apprehension, as of some sacrifice that was to be demanded of her in return for all that she had been given, a grievous dread of inflicting pain, far sharper and stranger than any yet, upon those whom she loved best and from whom she felt already separated as though by an invisible gulf, Frances would not dwell upon it.

Everyone was so kind to her, and she was happy, and Cousin Bertie had understood that never, never of her own free will would Frances grieve or disobey her, and had been so good to her—and they were going to see Hazel and the wonderful baby, Dickie.

And besides, had not Father Anslem and Mère Pauline both said that she was to leave the future in God's hands, and not to look ahead at all, just yet?

Frances thought that it was nice to be told just what one ought to do, and to feel such perfect confidence that the advice given came, even though through human agency, from a Divine source. It simplified everything very much. Later on, perhaps, that simplification might be terribly needed.

She resolutely put the thought from her.

"Wake up, Francie," said Mrs. Tregaskis' voice, tense with excitement; "we're just in. Of course, she won't have been able to meet us herself, I don't suppose—just at lunch-time——"

But she scanned the platform eagerly, all the same, even as she spoke.

The next moment there was a double exclamation of joy, as Hazel's charming, laughing face appeared at the window and her hands tugged at the stiff handle of the door.

## XVIII

HAZEL had not changed.

That much was evident in the first instant, and even after Frances had seen her, laughing and triumphant, playing with her baby son or, securely radiant, seated at the head of her husband's table, she still felt Lady Marlowood to be very much one with the little Hazel Tregaskis of Porthlew days.

Her relations with Bertha, even, were singularly unaltered. Frances knew that her guardian's imperious rule had weighed far more lightly on Hazel, in their nursery days, than on either of her wards. She had opposed to it a certain joyous pagan insensitiveness, for the most part too indifferently good-humoured to resist, but quite capable of overruling, lightly, merrily, yet more or less decisively, her mother's most trenchant bidding by her own calm quality of self-reliance.

Now, in such security of happiness as Frances had never dreamed of, her own way so amply justified as to need no further explanation, Hazel could afford to listen with the smiling surface docility that had always been hers, to Bertha's dictatorially-worded counsels for the welfare of Dickie and her tempered approval of his nursery arrangements.

But Frances did not think that Hazel meant to follow Cousin Bertie's wise advice about not spoiling the little darling, and making him learn at once that he must go to sleep at the proper times without being coaxed. Hazel only shook her tawny curls, and said in a tone of comical resignation that she was sure Dickie was going to be dreadfully spoiled, and she only hoped he would have a little brother to help keep him in order, and not an adoring sister.

Sir Guy was very polite to Mrs. Tregaskis, and very kind to Frances. It was he, Hazel eagerly told her



cousin, who had suggested that Frances should stay with them in the summer and be taken through her first season by Lady Marleswood.

Frances was impressed and almost overawed by such kindness. Sir Guy had hardly appeared to notice her existence at Porthlew, but he seemed quite different now, under his own roof, with no atmosphere of strain and disapproval to contend against.

"Does he know about me?" Frances asked Hazel rather timidly that evening.

Hazel had come into her cousin's bedroom in a blue silk *négligée* and sat on the floor, just as she used to do in her blue cotton kimono at Porthlew.

"What about you, except that you're a darling, and just like my very own sister?" demanded Lady Marleswood.

"Being a Catholic."

"Oh yes, of course, and we both think it perfectly splendid," declared Hazel lightly.

Frances felt relief at the very lightness of her tone.

"Was there a lot of difficulty about it? Were they all very vexed?" asked Hazel sympathetically.

"Rather vexed. Cousin Bertie was very, very kind, of course—and Rosamund understood, and didn't think I wanted to be separate or—or different or anything—you know what I mean, though I can't explain it at all well. But, of course, they didn't like it. Naturally."

"Now why 'naturally'?" What had it got to do with anyone but yourself? If it makes you any happier, why on earth shouldn't you be a Roman Catholic to-day and a Primitive Methodist to-morrow, if you want to? I've no patience with this never letting people run their own show," declared Lady Marleswood.

"It was very difficult to know what to do," rather solemnly said Frances.

"That's so like you, Francie dearest. I shouldn't have seen the least difficulty in it. Do whatever you want to do, and whatever you think best. Then you take your own risks and have nobody but yourself to blame if things go wrong. But I don't believe they do go wrong. Look at me!"

Frances looked—at the radiant blooming face of little Dickie's mother.

"I've never," said Hazel earnestly, "never for one single minute, regretted that I took my own way, Frances. I'm happier than I've ever been in my life, and even if I lost Guy and the baby to-morrow, I should still think it had been worth while."

Frances looked at her.

"You've not changed a bit, Hazel. I feel just as if you and Rosamund had been to some grown-up party and then you'd come into my room at Porthlew to tell me all about it."

"I'm so glad," cried Hazel delightedly. "I should hate it if you all thought I'd changed and become quite different just because I'm so happy. Francie, I do want Rosamund and you to be as happy as I am. It seems unfair that you shouldn't be, when you're both so much better than I am. Is Rosamund going to marry Morris Severing?"

"Oh no, I don't think so."

"That's all right. He's not nearly good enough for her. We'll find someone much nicer—a very clever man who writes books or something, I think—and when they're married you can live with her most of the time, till you marry yourself. Oh, Francie, I can't help it—I want to see *all* the people I love married now—it's so much the nicest thing to be!"

"It depends," faltered Frances, colouring.

Hazel looked at her with her shrewd, sympathetic gaze. She had that odd degree of intuition that the most frankly self-absorbed natures often display.

"Francie," she said slowly, "do you want to become a nun?"

Frances coloured helplessly under the unexpected bit of penetration.

"I don't know—oh, Hazel—what made you think that? I haven't said one word—not for a long time yet," she stammered incoherently.

"I'm not exactly surprised," remarked her cousin calmly. "You were always much too good for this world, darling; but do you think you'd be happy in a convent?"

"Of course I should be happy. But I don't know if— if they'd even have me. Oh, Hazel, it makes it all seem so much more real when we talk about it like this. I've not told anybody at all—not even Rosamund."

"I won't tell a soul," promised Hazel. "I don't know anything about convents at all, but there are some sisters who call for subscriptions sometimes at Marleswood, and they always look very nice and happy."

"Nuns are always happy," said Frances seriously.

"Are they? I wish I knew more about them, and what sort of life they have to lead. I suppose it's nice and peaceful and holy, if you like that sort of thing. Do you feel as though you had a vocation, or whatever it is, Frances?"

Frances said nothing, only looked at Hazel with large, distressed eyes.

"I'm talking of what I know nothing about," declared Lady Marleswood, kissing her affectionately. "I won't bother you about it, but if they worry you at Porthlew, when they know, you can come to us just whenever you like and for as long as you like. Nobody shall say anything to you, and you can go to church all day if you want to."

"Oh, Hazel, how nice you are!"

"Good-night, Francis darling. Do remember that the only thing is to follow one's own convictions quite regardless of anything and everyone. I know it sounds dreadful, but look at me! I'm a living example of the advantages of self-will. Now I must go and say good-night to mother."

Hazel left Frances to the realization that her hitherto unspoken desire had gained the strangest degree of life and substance from the mere facts of having been put into words, and received almost as a matter of course.

"Hazel seemed to think it quite natural, and not at all dreadful," Frances thought to herself. "Perhaps Cousin Bertie won't mind as much as I think she's going to. I know I'm a moral coward, because I'm more afraid of telling her, for fear she should be angry, than of telling Rosamund, who'll only be dreadfully unhappy. But I needn't think of it yet. Father Anselm said

I was not to think of the future at all, or to make plans. . . ."

She lost herself in surmises, that almost amounted to certainties, as to the interpretation her confessor had put upon her timidly vague references to her own future. That the shrewd little French Superior had penetrated her scarcely apprehended secret, Frances felt hardly any doubt.

"They'll tell me what to do when the time comes," she thought with a quickly beating heart, and remembered thankfully her new-found allegiance.

The day following, Mrs. Tregaskis and Frances went down to Cornwall.

Frances felt as though she had been away for a lifetime, and had to combat an unreasonable tendency to astonishment at finding her surroundings utterly unchanged.

It was a relief to her that no allusion was made at first to that change in herself of which she felt so acutely conscious.

Frederick, rather as though the words were dragged out of him under protest, asked for news of Hazel, and Miss Blandflower squeaked ecstatic inquiries about the baby.

"Is the dear little man like Hazel?"

"Not very like her," said Bertha rather slowly. "His eyes are dark blue, for one thing."

Everyone remembered Sir Guy's remarkably dark blue eyes, with the apparent exception of the unfortunate Minnie, who exclaimed in a high-pitched key of astonishment:

"Now where can he get that from? Yours are so very brown, dear Mrs. Tregaskis, and Hazel's, as we know, match her name."

"By some extraordinary coincidence," said Frederick's disagreeable voice, "the child has inherited his father's eyes."

Miss Blandflower looked confused, laughed a good deal in a nervous way, and made a characteristic attempt to retrieve her verbal footing by embarking upon a disastrous quotation:

"Ah well, it's a wise child that——"

"Give me a bun, Minnie," said Bertha in loud, commanding tones. "I be starvin' for my tay. Why, Francie and I haven't had a blow-out like this for I don't know how long. Tea at the convent consisted of stewed twigs and a Marie biscuit, eh, Frances? that is to say, when we got any at all."

"There wasn't very much," Frances admitted reluctantly, and without smiling.

"There was not indeed! And that Mrs. Mulholland has the appetite of a cormorant, positively."

Few feminine indictments can be much more virulent than the charge of "having an appetite," and there was a distinct quality of venom in Mrs. Tregaskis' tone.

"Is that the one Mrs. Severing talked about?" asked Rosamund.

"Yes, as though she were her dearest friend. Poor Nina's gush is sometimes apt to be misleading," laughed Bertha tolerantly. "Has she been over here, Rosamund?"

"She came yesterday, to see if you were back."

"Any news?"

"There's to be a concert at Polwerrow on the twentieth, and she wants to take us all. She'll call for us in the car and bring us back."

"Excellent. A deep draught of music is just what I want. Anyone good coming down? I suppose so, or Nina wouldn't condescend."

"Some violinist—I can't remember his name."

"You wouldn't!" laughed Bertha. "Well, my dear, that'll be very jolly. I love an outing, and there'll be plenty of room in the car for all of us."

"Mrs. Severing was kind enough to suggest my coming too—room for a small one," said Minnie agitatedly.

"Of course I said it wasn't to be thought of for a moment."

"Minnie, you know you like music, and you always go with us to any decent concert at Polwerrow," said Bertha patiently. "Of course you'll come."

Under cover of the protests, incoherent objections, and final yielding, which were always part and parcel of any invitation issued to and accepted by Miss Blandflower, Rosamund and Frances made their escape.

Their long talk together left Frances very happy. She gave Rosamund no such confidence as that sudden, unpremeditated one which had been drawn from her by Hazel's matter of fact suggestion, but nevertheless she was all but unconscious of any reticence.

It was to Rosamund that she could best pour out the story of her new experiences, and the fullness of Rosamund's sympathy gave no hint of any sense of exclusion.

If a division of the ways had been reached neither was conscious of it. To Rosamund, her sister's happiness, in itself unintelligible, became merely a subject for rejoicing, and the ready congratulations she gave out of her affection needed no deeper source to fill Frances with tender gratitude.

They drew nearer together in the very difference that might have separated them for a time.

## XIX

ONLY the Polwerrow concert broke the monotony of the months that followed. It was not a very great event, but it was on that evening that Rosamund, by one of the agonized intuitions that are among the penalties borne by the too highly-strung, first began to suspect what Frances had in mind.

They drove to Polwerrow in Mrs. Severing's car, and made their way into the reserved stalls selected by Nina.

"Don't push, as the elephant said to the flea when the animals went in two by two," Miss Blandflower muttered to herself, but, as usual, no one paid any attention to her.

They listened to much inferior singing: Bertha with a look of well-bred tolerance, Nina with closed eyes and a small, exoruciated frown.

Rosamund sat next to Frances.

She wondered idly what dreams her little sister wove into the playing of the famous violinist. Frances' face was absorbed, and her eyes quite unseeing. Rosamund thought that she looked very happy, as though her dreams were pleasant ones. Was she thinking of the ideals and aspirations newly revealed to her in the Catholic Church, Rosamund wondered. That Frances was finding the greatest happiness that her short life had as yet known, she felt no doubt, but she also wondered with quite unconscious cynicism how long that happiness would continue. Once received into the Church, it seemed to Rosamund, there appeared to be nothing further to which her sister could aspire, except, perhaps, to live quite near a Catholic church.

"There isn't one anywhere very near in the Wye Valley," Rosamund reflected. "I wonder if Francie will mind that, when we live there together. But she can go to her convent sometimes and stay there for a

little while, if she wants to. They were kind and nice to her. She likes the convent."

And it was then that there flashed across Rosamund's consciousness the first sickening, unreasoning suspicion, carrying with it all the anguish of certainty, that Frances would want to go and be a nun.

Shocked, as from a physical pang, she held on to the arms of her stall as though afraid of falling.

There was a pause in the music, and a faint sound or two as of uncertain applause. Rosamund saw Miss Blandflower begin to clap her hands enthusiastically, then turn doubtful eyes on Mrs. Severing, who had not moved, and begin to fumble with her gloves as though she had never meant to do anything else. The plaintive, poignant strains of the violin began again.

Rosamund suddenly felt that she dared not look at Frances, for fear of seeing in her face some mysterious confirmation of her own thoughts.

For a little while she argued with herself. It was absurd to jump at conclusions. Frances had never spoken, or given any hint, of wishing to become a nun. And even supposing she were infatuated with the idea for a time, her guardian would be the last person to encourage such a step. It would all be stopped and forbidden, and Frances would never be wilfully disobedient.

Such a thing could not happen—no one entered a convent nowadays. It was in medieval times that girls of one's own class became nuns—not nowadays. A convent had been a refuge from the world, then. Involuntarily Rosamund wondered whether it would not present itself in exactly that light to Frances, now. "But she's not going to—she can't. Why, it would mean shutting herself up away from me—for the whole of her life," thought Rosamund wildly.

She tried to look at it reasonably, to tell herself that this full-grown certainty which had suddenly sprung into being within her, was without any foundation in fact. She reminded herself of Cousin Bertie's favourite advice, not to cross bridges before they were reached. But Rosamund happened to possess that fundamental



form of sincerity which cannot blind itself to its own inner vision, and not all the wisdom of common-sense and of Cousin Bertie's optimistic philosophy, weighed against that one unreasoning flash of intuition.

A sudden craving for reassurance seized her uncontrollably.

She looked at Frances.

The last notes of the violin died away, and this time everyone broke into applause at once, and Miss Blandflower was able to clap fearlessly and noisily with the others.

Under cover of it all Rosamund leant towards her sister.

"Francie," she said urgently, "you wouldn't ever want to be a nun, would you? Promise me you wouldn't."

Perhaps there was some faint ray of hope underlying the wording of Rosamund's sudden appeal. For it was with a new and even more bitter pang that the last certainty came to her, as Frances, without a single word of answer, raised startled, almost terrified eyes to hers, and as their looks met, blushed a deep, painful scarlet.

Words between them were unnecessary, nor could either have spoken.

The concert went on, and Rosamund wished that it could never stop. In the blur of sound which seemed to surround her, she did not think that she would ever realize what had happened. It would all remain chaotic and unreal.

There was a little movement beside her, and Frances' small, soft hand sought hers, like that of a child seeking reassurance.

They did not look at one another, but for a moment their hands clung together.

"Shall we make a move now, before the crush?" said Mrs. Severing wearily. "Some of these renderings are really rather more than I can stand."

Bertha shrugged her shoulders very slightly, and looked at Rosamund and Frances.

"Come out of the moon, Rosamund. You don't look half awake, my child. We want to get out of this before

everyone begins to crowd. Come along, Minnie, come along."

Rosamund, in a dream, followed the wide, efficient figure of her guardian. Miss Blandflower had jammed a small rabbit-skin tie into the back of her stall, and, wrestling with it in an agony, was blocking the exit for both Frances and Mrs. Severing.

"Oh, my fur—dear me, isn't that tiresome, now! So sorry—do excuse me. . . ."

It was not difficult to conjecture that Miss Blandflower was trampling recklessly over the feet on either side of her in her endeavours to rescue the rabbit skin.

As she left the hall with Mrs. Tregaskis, Rosamund heard the last glee begin, and exclamations issuing in the penetrating husky falsetto which was peculiar to Miss Blandflower when whispering:

"Don't wait for me—but I'm afraid you can't get out—or could you squeeze past? This wretched fur of mine. Simply beyond the beyonds, isn't it? Wait a minute—the deed is done—no, it isn't—false alarm. Oh, how dreadful of me this is . . . you'll never forgive me, I'm afraid. Now then, a long pull and a strong pull. . . ."

The door swung to behind Rosamund.

"Where are the others?" asked her guardian.

Cousin Bertie always made her way through any crowd without any difficulty at all, partly because her bulk was considerable, and partly from a certain pleasant authoritative way she had of saying, "Thank you—if you'll just let me get past, please—thank you so much." Rosamund had noticed long ago that very few people were ever proof against that firm civility.

"Aren't they coming?" said Mrs. Tregaskis, when they were in the outer hall.

"Miss Blandflower's fur got caught into her chair or something, and the others couldn't get past."

"Wretched Minnie! Now they'll have to wait until the end of that chorus—Nina will never come out in the middle of it. How cross she'll be. Well, Rosamund, you and I may as well sit down and wait for them here."

Mrs. Tregaskis established herself on the red plush

sofa underneath an enlarged photograph of Mme. Clara Butt, and made room for Rosamund beside her.

"You look rather tired, old lady," she said kindly. Rosamund felt suddenly grateful for the kindness of her voice and said:

"A little, Cousin Bertie."

"A real deep draught of music always gives me a fresh lease of life," remarked Mrs. Tregaskis, drawing a deep breath that expanded her broad chest yet more. "Not that we heard very much to-night, but the violin was good, of course. Funny that music doesn't mean more to you two children, Rosamund. Your mother was wonderful. But still, I hope you and Frances enjoyed this evening."

"Oh yes," said Rosamund colourlessly.

Her guardian looked rather dissatisfied.

"Why so down in the mouth, eh?" she asked genially.

Mrs. Tregaskis was always very quick to detect an atmosphere.

Rosamund hesitated.

She partly shared Frances' old childish feeling that Mrs. Tregaskis must always get just that answer which she expected to get, to her kindly, peremptory questionings, and she was partly actuated by an intense, miserable need of reassurance that made her turn even to a source which she felt to be unlikely.

"I'm feeling rather worried about Frances," she said rather nervously, knowing that it was not a propitious beginning. Her tendency to torment herself and the whole household on the subject of imaginary anxieties about Frances' health or spirits had been genially but quite implacably combated by Mrs. Tregaskis ever since their first arrival at Porthlew.

She gave a half-humorous sigh.

"Well, darling, I'm sorry to hear that. But it isn't anything so very new, is it? You've pulled a long face over Frances ever since I can remember you both, when she was a little scared thing who didn't dare call her soul her own. I don't mean you ever bullied her, my dear—but there is such a thing as over-solicitude, you know."

Accustomed though Rosamund was to her guardian's kindly banter on the subject of Frances, she had never ceased to resent it with the wounded fury of an oversensitive child.

Instantly she resolved that it would be impossible to tell Cousin Bertie of her new-born dread.

"Well," said Mrs. Tregaskis, "what is it this time? Is she tired, or has she got a cold, or has Nina been hurting her feelings? Out with it."

Rosamund asked herself desperately: "Why was I such a fool as to begin this?" and aloud said in a sort of uncertain tone which to her own ears sounded very unconvincing:

"I was just thinking of her having become a Catholic, and all that. Whether—whether she'll be happier now, or—want anything more."

It was the nearest she could get to the sudden terror that had lain like lead at her heart ever since that silent interchange of looks with Frances.

"Want anything more!" Mrs. Tregaskis repeated rather derisively. "Are you afraid of her asking to join the Salvation Army next? Upon my word, Rosamund, I think better of the child than you do. She was very silly and wrong-headed about it, but at least it was all perfectly genuine, and she's in earnest about the religious part of it."

"Yes, I know she is. That's just it."

"My dear, don't be a little goose. She's 'verted to the faith that your mother was born into, after all, and it's perfectly natural that she should take the whole thing very much to heart and prove a trifle *exaltée* about it all. It's a most wholesome symptom, I assure you, and one I've been watching for. Presently there'll be a reaction, and then she'll settle down normally, I hope. But you'll do her much more harm than good if you sit like a cat watching a mouse—waiting for every sign. It will only make her self-conscious."

Under the flow of so much common-sense, such sound, kindly advice, Rosamund had nothing to say. A creeping sensation of numbness invaded her mind. She ceased to feel acutely unhappy or apprehensive.

Mrs. Tregaskis, solid, competent, looking at her with rather puzzled eyes, seemed a sufficient bulwark against any such ephemeral fears as those which lay at Rosamund's heart.

"My dear little girl," said Bertha earnestly, "don't go looking for trouble. I'll give you a piece of advice which has helped me over some very rough bits of ground, rougher than any you're ever likely to meet with, please God:

"Look up, and not down;  
Look out, and not in;  
Look forward, and not back,  
Lend a hand."

That's pretty well coloured my whole life, Rosamund. I wasn't as old as you are now when I first read those words, and I've never forgotten them."

There was a moment's silence, and Mrs. Tregaskis' fine eyes grew for once introspective.

Then she roused herself briskly and exclaimed:

"Here are the others at last! Well, Nina, what happened to you?"

The drive home passed almost in silence. Mrs. Severing was annoyed at having been delayed, and replied coldly to all Bertha's cheery assurances of enjoyment that much was lacking to the more modern interpreters of music. Had not Bertie felt it so? Ah well, perhaps not!

Miss Blandflower, contrite and incoherent, was responsible for most of the conversation, such as it was.

That night Rosamund and Frances exchanged only a very few words. Rosamund indeed did not feel that words were needed to emphasize the unhappy certainty that was hers, and any discussion seemed to distress Frances, who said stammeringly and with tears in her eyes that nothing would be done for a long, long time, and even Father Anselm and Mère Pauline didn't know yet.

"Have you thought of what Cousin Bertie will say?"

"No," said Frances, the sudden whitening of her face belying the courage of her tone. "It's no use thinking about that until the time comes."

"And when will it come?" Rosamund asked wonderingly.

"I don't know. I suppose Father Anselm will settle that. He is my director. Oh, Rosamund, it's such a relief to know that one can't do wrong as long as one is obedient. I just have to submit my own private judgment to what the Church teaches through her priests, and it's such a comfort."

Rosamund marvelled.

But she saw that Frances, in spite of the lurking apprehensions for the future which she so resolutely tried to put from her, was essentially happy.

It seemed to Rosamund now that the weeks were slipping by with incredible rapidity. She no longer thought of Morris Severing, and was occasionally ashamed of her own oblivion. But the honesty which in her was innate, did not allow her to falsify her own scale of relative values, and she knew that Morris was relegated to the unimportance of an episode.

After a little while she induced in herself a sort of surface sense of reassurance about Frances. No one else ever hinted at any thought of religious vocation, and Frances never spoke of it. Rosamund thought wistfully that perhaps she had abandoned the idea and sought to confirm the trembling hope that sometimes rose within her, in tiny ways that she strove to persuade herself would mean a great deal. She sometimes spoke to Frances of "next winter," or asked if she meant to get new frocks for going, later on, to stay with Hazel in London, and Frances always answered naturally and without demur. But Rosamund did not dare to make any allusion to their old plan of going back to live together in the Wye Valley.

It seemed as if life at Porthlew would always consist of the same uneventful routine, and Rosamund, far from feeling it tedious, found herself regarding each monotonous day as it slipped past in the light of a respite.

But the sword of Damocles fell at last, when her anxiety was almost dormant.

"Francie, my child, there's quite a large mail for you to-day," cheerily exclaimed Bertha, distributing the letters. "Two fat envelopes."

"I always say that Frances mustn't expect to get many letters, because she seldom writes any," said Miss Blandflower with an air of sapience.

Frances took her correspondence without saying anything, but something in her face brought Rosamund's every apprehension to life again in one unreasoning rush of terror.

She restrained herself with difficulty from making inquiries of her sister when breakfast was over, but in the course of the morning Frances sought Rosamund in the garden of her own accord.

"I've heard from Father Anselm and from Mère Pauline," she said gently. She looked nervous, but not at all agitated. It was as though she were stating the accomplishment of some long-expected project.

"I didn't know you'd written to them," said Rosamund dully.

"I thought it wasn't any use to say anything till I had the answers," Frances said apologetically. "They might have told me to put the whole thing out of my mind, you know."

"They—they don't do that, then?"

"No. I've brought the letters for you to read, Rosamund."

The Prior of Twickenham's letter was not a long one, and struck Rosamund as that of a peculiarly simple and unworldly man. He told Frances that he had long ago guessed the destiny which God held in store for her, and that he believed her vocation to the religious life to be a real one. She must speak to her guardians and obtain their consent before taking any step. Meanwhile, she was to write freely and to count upon his prayers that her decision might be guided and blessed from above. There was little else in the letter, but something in its tone of matter-of-fact acceptance frightened Rosamund.

Mère Pauline wrote at much greater length. She congratulated Frances on "the great honour she had received" and promised her many prayers, but after that she became at once characteristically practical in her advice. If Frances' director thought with her that she was suited to their own form of convent life, then Mère

Pauline would be very glad to receive her, and meanwhile Frances must try and fit herself to be of great use. She must take care of her health, so as to be strong, and she must study, so as to be able to work, and above all, she must not neglect prayer and meditation. And, added Mère Pauline in a matter-of-fact postscript, it might be no bad plan to set about learning Latin, for greater facility in the recitation of the Holy Office. But she need not impress upon her dear child that, above all, must the feelings of that family, so soon to be called upon for so great a sacrifice, be tenderly considered.

"Frances!" said Rosamund aghast. "She writes as though the whole thing were settled."

Her little sister looked at her with compassionate, loving eyes, and said nothing.

But Rosamund knew, more surely than any words could have told her, that in effect, the whole thing, as she had said, was settled.

The conviction remained with her even when it became obvious that the main conflict was yet to come.

"When are you going to tell *them*?" she asked later.

"Soon," said Frances.

But that Frances' courage had not yet proved equal to the avowal was made manifest some weeks later when Rosamund, unnoticed in the window, heard part of a conversation between Frederick Tregaskis and his wife.

"I shall want the trap in the morning, Frederick. I've got to drive Francie into Polverrow."

"Why?"

"Church, my dear man, church. It's some holy Roman feast or other, and I promised the child she should get in to Mass if possible."

"Very unreasonable," growled Frederick.

"I knew you'd say so, dear," patiently replied Bertha, who was apt to display tolerance of her ward's inconvenient religion in proportion as her husband grumbled at it. "I should have thought Sundays quite enough, myself."

"As to that," replied the disconcerting Frederick, "she pays for her own cab on Sundays and doesn't



inconvenience anyone but herself. I'm not saying anything to her Sunday expeditions."

"Well, well—it's something to have peace. The child is perfectly happy, and has looked much better since she stopped fretting. Thank goodness, the religious crisis, since apparently she had to have one, is safely over and done with."

Rosamund wrung her hands together in silent anguish.

She did not know what Frances' latest decision might portend, but there seemed to stretch before her a despairing vista of pain and separation, based on principles that appeared to her but as the shadow of a dream.

It was in a very little while that Mrs. Tregaskis became fully aware of the fallacy in her hopeful theory that the crisis was over for the younger of her two adopted daughters.

"I can't think how I could ever have been so blind. Give children an inch and they'll take an ell! I might have guessed that Frances would develop some fanatic notion of this kind. Why did I ever let her go to that wretched convent? She's thought of nothing else ever since, and now she tells me that they're 'willing to receive her' into the novitiate there. Willing, indeed! I should think they were!"

"Of course, Bertie dear, if you let her get under the influence of priests and nuns, what else can you expect?" inquired Mrs. Severing.

"You can't reproach me more than I do myself," said Bertha vehemently. "Though I must say, dearest, it's rather laughable coming from you, since you were the very person who urged me to send the child to make that Retreat, and even insisted on going with her yourself, if you remember."

Nina looked at her greatest friend for a moment in silence, and then said in the compassionate tones of a ministering angel:

"My poor dear! I can see that you're so much on edge about the whole thing, you simply don't know what you're saying. I am so sorry for you."

"Thank you, Nina," said Mrs. Tregaskis rather dryly. "It would be more to the point, perhaps, if you knew what to say to Frances. Do you think you could put a little sense into her?"

The inquiry was more than tinged with doubtfulness, as Bertha eyed her friend coldly, and Mrs. Severing, with a sudden access of austerity, replied in accents grown markedly remote:

"Really, Bertie, you mustn't ask me to come between Frances and her conscience. I have a very great deal of influence with her, as you know, and I shouldn't care to take such a responsibility on myself. The child's instinct is a very pure and holy one, and personally I can't see why she shouldn't follow her own inspiration. It may very well be a God-given one."

"I never heard such an outrageous piece of nonsense in my life," declared Mrs. Tregaskis, for once losing control of her temper. "Anything to save trouble, Nina. That's you all over. Always the line of least resistance! Well, I'm not going to let Frances ruin her life by taking a step of which she doesn't even realize the meaning, before she's seen anything of life. Even Roman Catholics insist on their daughters waiting until they're of age before letting them enter a convent."

"I'm afraid Frances isn't your daughter, Bertie, which may make all the difference. Though really," said Nina dreamily, "it doesn't seem to matter much nowadays, since the younger generation takes its own line without reference to any standards but its own. The myth of parental authority is altogether done away with."

"Frances isn't made of the same stuff as Morris, my dear. Well, if you won't or can't help me, I must tackle the situation by myself. It isn't the first time I've taken on a tough job single-handed, and it won't be the last, I don't suppose. Ah well! it's better to wear out than to rust out!"

In the ensuing weeks at Porthlew it appeared not unlikely that the process of wearing out would extend to other members of the household in addition to Mrs. Tregaskis.

Frances, white and exalted, spent her days in writing to the Prior of Twickenham and to Mère Pauline and the major part of her nights in tears. Only Rosamund realized how inflexible was the determination that underlay her sobbing protests.

Miss Blandflower bleated frightened auguries and ejaculatory condemnations, and Rosamund upheld Frances passionately and told herself that it would only be an experiment, and that, of course, Frances would never, never stay at the convent for life.

"Will they let you come away if you want to?" she asked tensely.

"Yes," said Frances almost violently. "That's what a novitiate is for."

"Will you promise to come away if you find you've made a mistake?"

"I promise."

"Then Cousin Bertie ought to let you go," declared Rosamund, sick with misery. "If it's the only thing that will make you happy."

For answer Frances began to cry again, piteously and silently, as she used to cry when a child.

Rosamund, with the same despairing instinct of rebellion and impotent protection that had been hers in the days when she had resisted Bertha Tregaskis' kindness to the little orphan sisters, put her arms round Frances.

"Don't cry," she whispered. "I'll go to Cousin Frederick, and he must *make* Cousin Bertie give in. They've no real right to forbid you."

She sought Frederick Tregaskis in the study which had become his almost permanent refuge from the strained atmosphere now prevalent at Porthlew.

He looked up angrily, and her heart failed her, but she began steadily enough.

"I've come to speak to you about Frances——"

"I don't wish to hear you. Everyone comes to speak to me about Frances. When I come into this room, it is in order to avoid being spoken to about Frances."

"I know it is," said Rosamund desperately. "But I only want to say one thing, Cousin Frederick——"

"Then don't say it in here. Come into some other part of the house."

Rosamund followed the exasperated Frederick into the hall, where he made a sound expressive of disgust on seeing Miss Blandflower, wearing a large pair of yellow wax-leather gloves, arranging flowers. Rosamund, however, was not even aware of the governess's presence.

"Frances is breaking her heart. She thinks that she is meant to be a nun and that she ought not to wait indefinitely. Will you give her leave to go? I don't believe she'll stay there long——"

"I've told her already that I'm not in a position to give or refuse leave. She's no daughter of mine."

"It will satisfy her conscience if you will just say that she has your consent," urged Rosamund.

Minnie, listening hard in the background, muttered frantically: "Conscience in truth makes cowards of us all; and how she can even speak of such a thing!"

"She can have my consent for what it's worth," said Frederick Tregaskis. "But she must fight it out for herself with your Cousin Bertha."

"That's the worst of it——"

"Of course it's the worst of it! And the sooner she puts an end to it the better. This house is like a—shambles," said Frederick in tones which convinced Miss Blandflower, who did not know what the word meant, that a shambles must be some recondite form of impropriety. She became very red and uttered a shocked and protesting titter, which had the effect of drawing Frederick's eye upon her for a searing moment before he again retreated to the impregnable study.

But Rosamund took comfort with her when she went back to Frances.

"If it's only Cousin Bertie," said Frances rather surprisingly, "I don't mind so much. I know I'm frightened of her, though she's so very, very kind, but Father Anselm says that my first duty is to God, and that it's not as if she were really my mother. He thinks I ought to enter now."

"It's only an experiment," cried Rosamund entreatingly, but with a sinking heart.

And Frances would not contradict her.

The days dragged by in an atmosphere of eternal discomfort.

Bertha's face showed signs of wearing and of wakeful nights, but she remained determinedly normal and even cheerful. Miss Blandflower loyally supported her with chirping and obvious contributions to the lagging conversation at meals and in the evenings, and even Frances, pale-faced and with scared, sorrowful eyes, made her evident and rather piteous attempts to behave as usual in the face of a mental struggle that she felt to be only

the strength-sapping preliminary to an impending crisis of upheaval.

Rosamund, supersensitive to atmosphere, and bearing the weight of her sister's dumb unhappiness as well as that of her own rebellious, apprehensive misery, began to feel that the only hope of relief for any of them lay in the decisive cutting of the Gordian knot.

"This can't go on, you know," she said ruthlessly to Frances. "What are you waiting for?"

"Waiting for?"

"Yes. Do you think Cousin Bertie will ever give in?"

"No."

"Then do you mean to put the whole thing out of your mind till you're much older—say about twenty-five—and just submit, till then?"

Even as she spoke, Rosamund felt convinced that such a course had not presented itself to Frances.

"No," said Frances with the inflexible note in her childish voice that Porthlew was learning to dread. "It wouldn't be right to do that. Father Anselm is a very wise priest and very holy, and he says I ought to be brave and go now. If I am unfaithful to my vocation, it may be taken away from me."

Rosamund, quite unconscious of humour, reflected on the extreme convenience of such a solution. She did not believe that any Divine call had come to her sister, but she felt convinced that Frances would know no rest until she had tested by experience the reality of her religious vocation.

"You'd better go, I think," she said abruptly.

"Go now?" Frances whitened. "Then I should have to run away."

"Oh no, Francie! If you say, definitely, that you're going to the convent no one can stop you. They can't lock you up or use brute force."

The moral courage involved in such a course seemed unattainable to Frances. The psychological moment, however, for which we all, consciously or unconsciously, wait when on the brink of a vital decision, came at last.

There came an instant, unexpectedly even to herself,

when Frances looked up from a letter received by the afternoon post, and said suddenly:

"Cousin Bertie, Mère Pauline writes that I had better go to the convent some time next month, if I can get my things ready. I—I want you to let me fix a date."

Her heart was beating so that she felt as though she must suffocate.

"I have already written to Mère Pauline, Frances, and she knows quite well that I do not think you old enough or strong enough or wise enough to take such a step as that, at any rate for the present."

"When *would* you let me, then?"

"I don't know, my child. When you've learnt to be less self-righteous and self-opinionated at home I shall think you better fitted to try and undertake a life of mortification and humility."

Then Bertha suddenly relapsed into her normal tones of hearty kindness.

"My dear, I hate playing the heavy guardian and talking to you like this, but these people have worked you up into taking the whole thing *au grand sérieux*, until one doesn't know what other tone to adopt. Can't you be content to trust me, Francie?"

"I do trust you," said Frances miserably. "But I must do what I think right. It would be a sin not to."

"My dear child, don't talk such nonsense. Do you mean to say that you think we ought all to rush into convents, under pain of sin? How would the world go on, pray?"

Bertha laughed a little, but Frances answered her quite seriously.

"No, I don't think that. I quite see that everyone can't enter the religious life—but then everyone doesn't want to."

"Every enthusiastic little girl who has just been bitten by a Romanist craze wants to," said Bertha laughing, "but no one has any business to encourage them, and I don't think any the better of your convent authorities for doing so, my Francie."

"May I go there next month?"

"No, my dear, you may not, and if you can't make

up your mind to it, I shall forbid any more correspondence with these people. I don't want to be severe with you, and I know quite well that you think you're doing right and being a little martyr in a sacred cause, etc., but I've got *my* conscience to think of as well as yours, you know."

Frances began to cry again, in a helpless, inefficient sort of way that gave no hint of the sense of irrevocability that had taken possession of her and finally clinched her resolution.

Bertha left the room, frowning a little in her vexation and perplexity.

"You're making yourself quite ill with all this worry, dear Mrs. Tregaskis," protested Minnie fondly. "You really will break down."

"Oh, it would take more than that to make me break down, my dear! But it certainly is very tiresome, and making the whole house uncomfortable. However, there's a meeting I have to go to at Pensevern school next week, and I shall spend a couple of nights with Nina. That'll make a break, and give me a bit of a rest. And between ourselves, Minnie, when I get back I'm going to arrange to send Frances somewhere for a little change. It'll do us all good to get away from one another for a while, and then we shall be able to start fresh. Poor little girl, I can't bear to see her so wretched."

"Mrs. Tregaskis," said Minnie with conviction, "you really are an angel without any wings."

The following week witnessed the departure of the angelic Mrs. Tregaskis for Pensevern, and the atmosphere of tension at Porthlew sensibly relaxed.

Even Frances seemed to have recaptured some of the characteristic serenity that she had only recently lost, and she and Rosamund spent the afternoon together amongst the mellow reds and yellows of the autumn garden, happy in the midst of trivial, familiar things. As they turned indoors as dusk was falling, Frances spoke.

"Rosamund, I had meant not to tell you—but after all, I couldn't—and besides, you always know. . . . You know what Father Anselm said I ought to do—?"



A pang, that held far more of recognition in it than of surprise, went through Rosamund.

"Go to the convent in spite of them!"

"Yes. I'm going to do it while Cousin Bertie is away."

"Francie! Is it quite fair?"

"I don't know," said Frances calmly. "I haven't told Father Anselm or Mère Pauline or any of them, because it would be such a dreadful responsibility for them to know—and, besides, they might not think it right to *advise* me to run away from home. But it's the only way I shall ever have the courage to do it."

Rosamund felt a sense of utter impotence invading her as she listened to the childish voice, made resolutely steady and matter-of-fact.

"But Cousin Bertie will be back the day after to-morrow."

"I know. So I'm going to-morrow."

"Francie!"

"Don't," said Frances, her voice quivering for the first time. "It's the only way I can ever do it, I'm such a moral coward. And it's far better to do it all quickly than to have a long waiting first—that would be much harder for both of us, Rosamund. At first I thought I wouldn't even tell you, so that you wouldn't have to say good-bye or anything sad—but then I couldn't help it. I knew you'd understand."

"I understand," said Rosamund drearily, conscious only that she must not make it harder for Frances.

"But have you thought at all how you're going to do it?"

A sense of unreality rushed upon her.

"To-morrow! It's impossible—you can't do it."

"I've looked up the trains and everything," said Frances literally. "I can take the one o'clock train, and you must send my box after me. I can't take it because the servants would know—but by the time Cousin Bertie is back, everybody will know, and it won't matter."

"You can't arrive there with nothing at all," said Rosamund, her mind refusing to take in any but the immediate practical issues of the case.

"I shall carry my little tiny attaché case, and if I

start early I'm certain to meet someone or other who will give me a lift to the station. It's market day, you know."

"You've never even travelled alone," began Rosamund, conscious of futility.

"But I can't possibly make any mistake. It's a through train to London, and then I shall take a cab to Liverpool Street Station and go on from there. It's not a very long journey if I get a good train."

"Will they know you're coming?"

"I shall telegraph from London."

"Francie, you say you're a moral coward, and yet you've planned everything out like this! What would you do supposing you met Cousin Bertie on your way to the station? It might quite easily happen."

Frances whitened instantly.

"I'd thought of that, but her meeting is at two o'clock, and they're sure to go early. Cousin Bertie always does. So they'll be having luncheon at one o'clock, and you know Mrs. Severing hardly ever has the motor out in the mornings. So I don't think there's any real chance of it."

"I suppose not," said Rosamund drearily. "What on earth will she say when she comes back and finds you've gone?"

"Oh, Rosamund, it will be so dreadful for you! I'll leave a letter for her, and then you won't have to tell her."

"What about Cousin Frederick and Miss Blandflower?"

"Cousin Frederick hardly ever comes in to luncheon, and he's quite likely not to notice that I'm not at dinner. Even if he does, he'll probably think I've just gone to bed or something—you know he never bothers. I'm afraid Miss Blandflower will have to know at dinner-time, but she won't be in herself for luncheon."

"How do you know?"

"She's going to the Rectory. She told me, quite by chance. Oh, Rosamund," said Frances with an awestruck face, "it does seem as though I were meant to do this. All sorts of little things seem to have hap-

pened together, to make it possible. You know Cousin Bertie never goes away as a rule—I might have had to wait for months for this opportunity, and yet it's happened now—just the very time that Mère Pauline wrote to say she would receive me in the novitiate. It's all too wonderful."

"Do you mean to say you're really happy about it all?"

"Yes, oh yes! If only it wasn't for the leaving of you."

Rosamund marvelled miserably.

It seemed to her that the evening went by in a dream.

She could not believe that it was Frances' last night at Porthlew.

But even if she came back, it would be only after an experience that would stretch like a gulf between all that had been before and all that might come after. She went to Frances' room and they packed her box, locking the bedroom door carefully, and Rosamund wrote out a label and affixed it to the small trunk.

"I'll put the things in the attaché case to-morrow morning," said Frances, looking rather wistfully round the room. "It seems so funny to be leaving all my frocks behind. I wish you could wear them, Rosamund, but you're too tall."

"You aren't leaving them for good. You'll want them when you come out," cried Rosamund, and hurried on lest Frances should contradict her: "You'll remember that you've promised—*promised*—to come away if you find you've made a mistake."

"Yes," said Frances faithfully. "I'll remember."

That night they slept together.

The morning pierced through a soaking white mist, a day typical of Cornwall in the autumn.

Miss Blandflower came down looking harassed and haggard, and announced that she had toothache. Breakfast proceeded as usual, and Rosamund found it quite impossible to realize that in a few hours Frances would be gone.

But the morning sped by, swift and yet leaden. At midday Miss Blandflower put on galoshes and a mackintosh and set off for the Rectory, valiantly suppressing a hinted inclination to "give in" to her increasing toothache, and remain seated over the fire, and as she went down the drive Frances said gently:

"I shall want a waterproof. I've only got my blue serge coat and skirt and my brown hat to travel in."

"Put on thick shoes," said Rosamund urgently, as though she had no other preoccupation.

When Frances stood ready, looking pale and childish, and grasping her little leather case, Rosamund pulled down a thick Irish frieze cape from the hall and flung it round her own shoulders.

"I'm coming as far as the road with you," she said in an inward voice.

Dumbly they went together down the steps and across the gravelled court. The thick mist seemed to swallow them up, and Frances put her hand into Rosamund's.

Outside the drive gate they stopped. It was the high-road which lay outside, and down which the farm carts and pony traps would pass on their way to market.

"I will write to-night in the train, after I've left London."

"So will I, darling."

They stood in silence.

"If something doesn't come soon, I ought to begin to walk," said Frances nervously. "I can't miss the train."

The sound of wheels, muffled in the fog but unmistakable, came to them both almost as she spoke.

"I don't know if they'll see us, the mist is so bad just here. Come a little on to the road, Francis."

"I think it's Mrs. Westaway's cart. I can see the white horse."

They hailed the cart and Frances called out her request.

The farmer's wife acceded to it cheerfully, begging Miss

Frances not to keep the mare standing, but to jump up quickly.

So Rosamund kissed her once, almost threw the little case in after her, and in another instant the high dog-cart and jolly, fat Mrs. Westaway on the driving-seat with her great baskets of market produce, and Frances clinging to the back seat, and the impatient white mare, had all disappeared into the mist, and even the sound of wheels had become inaudible.

She went back to the house, the laurels and rhododendron bushes on either side of the drive dripping on to the sodden ground.

All the afternoon she tried to tell herself that Frances was gone, and found herself repeating the words over and over again, but still they carried no conviction to her. She thought that perhaps at dinner-time, when she would inevitably have to explain Frances' absence to Miss Blandflower, it might help her to understand what had happened. But Miss Blandflower sent a message downstairs to say that her tooth was much worse, and she had gone to bed, and did not wish to have any dinner.

So Rosamund and Frederick Tregaskis dined together in almost unbroken silence, and he did not appear to notice the absence of Frances. At nine o'clock a telegram was brought to Rosamund, and she tore it open with a vague, sick sense of apprehension, and read:

*"Arrived safely—kindest possible welcome here—best love.—FRANCES."*

That night Rosamund cried and sobbed herself to sleep as she had done in the days of her childhood after her mother's death.

She woke to the realization that Mrs. Tregaskis would return that day.

At breakfast Frederick asked her suddenly:

"Is Frances upstairs?"

"No. Miss Blandflower is upstairs with toothache."

"I know that. Where's your sister?"

Rosamund looked at him dumbly, searching less for

words in which to clothe her meaning than for the power to speak at all.

"H'm!" Frederick looked at her significantly. "You can make your own explanations to your Cousin Bertha, then."

Rosamund instantly felt convinced that he knew perfectly well what those explanations were to be.

Earlier than Rosamund had expected, she heard the hoot of Mrs. Severing's motor in the drive, and then sounds indicating that Mrs. Tregaskis had descended and entered the house.

Without the slightest idea of what she was about to do or say, Rosamund went into the hall.

The mist of the day before had cleared altogether, and sunlight streamed into the hall and over the ample form of Mrs. Tregaskis, rapidly unwinding her motor-veil before the glass, her back to the door against which Rosamund leant heavily, from sheer physical inability to advance further.

Miss Blandflower, a pallid and grotesque figure with one side of her face swollen beneath the small grey shawl that draped her head and shoulders, was hurrying feebly down the stairs.

"My dear old Minnie! What have you been doing to yourself? An abscess?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing. A bad tooth, and I foolishly went out in the wet yesterday and caught cold. There's no luck about the house—you know the old song, dear Mrs. Tregaskis. It's a sight for sore eyes to see you back, as they say."

"Where are my girls?"

Rosamund tried to speak, and made an inarticulate sound.

Bertha whirled round.

"Hallo, hallo! Why, my dear, what's wrong?"

Her voice changed.

"Rosamund, what's happened? Where's Frances?"

Miss Blandflower gazed from one to the other, a puzzled smile further distorting her swollen face.

Quicker than Rosamund could find words Mrs. Tregaskis' quick perceptions had leapt at the truth.

"Frances has gone! She's gone to that convent!"

"Yes," said Rosamund at last, and felt as though an immense weight had suddenly been taken from her.

"Oh, she couldn't have been so wicked—oh, I knew *nothing* about it," screamed Minnie, and collapsed on to the stairs.

Bertha sank heavily on to a chair.

## XXI

FRANCES gazed at her hands. Their appearance was the greatest amongst the minor trials of convent life. She wondered wistfully what Rosamund would think of them. They were small hands, with long, nervous fingers, and now each knuckle was swelled and purple from the cold and unaccustomed manual work, and the chilblains on the back of almost every one had broken and exposed raw cracks and fissures to the chill morning air.

The novice with her serge habit tucked up so as to expose the stout black underskirt below, the coarse cotton stockings and heavy, ill-made shoes, bore small resemblance to Frances Grantham in her blue coat and skirt and brown velvet hat, arriving at the convent door some few months before.

Her face was fuller, and had more colour in it, but there was a deep black shadow under each eye denoting lack of sufficient sleep.

This question of sleep had assumed for Frances, as for her companions, a prominence that seemed strange and unnatural.

Hitherto Frances had slept for eight hours every night, sometimes for longer, and had never thought of the amount of rest she took in any but the most cursory and matter-of-fact fashion. In the first days of her convent life, the novice mistress spoke to her of the early rising as a trial which might perhaps prove severe. Frances thought: "Getting up at five in cold weather must be an effort, until one gets used to it."

She heard the bell clang out its one hundred strokes every morning, at the first stroke of which the novice in the cubicle on either side of her sprang from her straw mattress to the thin strip of carpet that lay beside each bed. For the first six weeks she had fallen asleep again instantly, and only been roused by the small alarm clock



set for six o'clock which her novice-mistress had made her use. Then she asked for permission to rise with the others and follow the full routine of the day, and it was granted her. The first stroke of the "*cloche à cent coups*" was now the signal for her also to leave her pallet and begin the day with the ritual of mental prayer prescribed for each religious during her robing. Heavy and sodden with sleep though her eyelids felt, Frances found that the mere physical anticipation of the inexorable clang that heralded five o'clock, would very often wake her even earlier, and keep her awake, tense and nervous with the fear that she might lack courage enough to rise on the very instant that the first sound of the bell should clash into the air.

But she always found that the physical effort, in some mysterious way, was overcome, and that accomplished, she lost the sense of mental stress, and was only conscious of the overpowering need of sleep. Through the winter months, when even a liberal application of ice-cold water failed to rouse her more than momentarily, she seldom knew by what mechanical process she had dressed, and found her way down the dark stone corridor and steep stairway only lighted by a flickering little oil-lamp, until she was on her knees in the as-yet-unwarmed chapel, waiting for the stroke of half-past five to proclaim the hour for meditation.

Kneeling upright upon the boards, her hands clasped upon the back of a *prie-dieu* too high to support her elbows, the struggle with her atrophied senses gradually began. Conscious effort was succeeded by the spasmodic violent starts that proclaimed her will to be alive, and gaining dominion over her relaxed muscles.

From the stall where the novice-mistress knelt, invariably upright, her wide-open gaze fixed upon the High Altar, came the slow unemphatic announcements of the Points of Meditation, cutting across the cold, still atmosphere of the chapel.

Frances forced her mind to receive the words, then gradually to attach to them a meaning. After that, in spite of cold and the cramp that almost invariably seized her from the effort to remain motionless upon her knees,

her mind was awake, and her battle with sleep was over until the evening. Through the recital of the Office, and the early Mass, attention was seldom an effort to Frances. Afterwards, the rapid, efficient sweeping and dusting of her cubicle and the struggle to turn the heavy *paillasse* on the wooden planks which formed the bed, left her heated and glowing, only anxious lest she should be late in taking her place in the long refectory for breakfast.

Instructions and religious exercises filled the morning, and the midday recreation succeeded dinner.

"The test of a good novice is her attitude towards the community recreation," was a favourite axiom of the novice-mistress.

Frances had been told that this recreation might prove to be a great trial, and sometimes wondered whether there was anything abnormal in her extreme and child-like enjoyment of this part of her religious life.

The ten or twelve novices, most of whom were Irish or English, one American, two Spanish, and the rest French, spent the allotted forty-five minutes in company of the novice-mistress, and of one another. The conversation was general, usually gay, and always impersonal.

Up and down the small garden the little group paced slowly on fine days, carefully avoiding the larger gathering of "*la grande communauté*," also assembled in recreation round the Superior. Little or no intercourse was permitted between the novices and the professed religious.

On wet days, and not infrequently on days which Frances regretfully thought delightfully fresh and moist, but at which the novice-mistress raised protesting hands and exclamations of "*Ce climat anglais !*" the perambulations of the novitiate took place in a long corridor some six or seven feet broad, the length of which it was possible to traverse slowly, in little groups of three or four, always with the novice-mistress as central point. Many of the novices walked backwards, so as to face her continually. Most of them held knitting, or wool which could be wound on to cards whilst still walking, but as soon as she made a move into the small community room, mending and darning baskets were produced and set upon the floor beside each low wooden stool ranged against the

wall. The novice-mistress sat also upon a stool, placed on a low, wooden dais at the end of the room. She thus dominated the room as naturally as she did the conversation. In her early days at the convent it was a continual cause of wonder to Frances that this conversation, general as it was, could remain so animated and yet so singularly impersonal.

The welfare of the Order in general was often discussed, the old days when its headquarters had been in Paris tenderly recalled by the novice-mistress, and her varied reminiscences of those times and of the expulsion which ensued, eagerly listened to by the little assembly. Sometimes there was talk of such small technicalities as the origin of some point of Rubric, or a broader question of Church ruling, but for the most part the conversation ran cheerfully upon trivial lines. It was always conducted in French, and the famous Gallicanism—"Moi, je"—was apt to provoke a general burst of merry laughter and a humorous glance or word of rebuke from the novice-mistress. But pronouns relating to the first person singular were seldom much in evidence.

The knowledge that she must not seek to place herself beside any one companion, that she must not move from her low stool during recreation without asking and obtaining leave to do so, and that any form of personality beyond the most trivial allusion must be excluded from her conversation, failed to disturb Frances' calm enjoyment of the three-quarters of an hour which always seemed to her so quickly over.

Rising from her little stool on the first stroke of the bell which proclaimed renewed silence, she was generally conscious of distinct exhilaration, resulting from the interval of talk and laughter. In virtue of her English nationality, Frances was often allowed to make her half-hour's spiritual reading out of doors. This she did after the midday recreation, gravely kilting her serge habit above the stiff woollen underskirt, and pacing the round of the garden with steady, measured footsteps, her head bent over some devotional volume bound in stout brown paper with a little gummed blue label on the back.

The afternoon's routine of instructions, choir-practices,

and the like was unbroken till supper at seven o'clock. The institution of afternoon tea held no place in the convent curriculum, and Frances, who had been told that this might at first present itself to her in the light of a deprivation, found herself, on the contrary, thankful that no additional meal should intervene between the substantial dinner and supper.

The amount of coarse but nourishing food which she found herself expected to assimilate was a continual source of wonder and at first of distress, to the novice. Where were the ascetic fasts and austerities of the religious life, if one was required to make two such meals every day? Even on the regular days of fasting and abstinence decreed by the Church, Frances found that she was only allowed to indulge in a modified form of abstinence.

Even after six months novitiate, she still looked doubtfully at the brown platter heaped with butter beans, the hunk of bread, and the huge slab of cold meat that so often constituted her midday portion. She knew that ~~she~~ might not leave anything unfinished, and the half-hour allotted to dinner was apt to hurry past her and bring her to her feet at the recital of Grace with half of her allowance still untouched.

"*Ma mère, puis-je aller finir au réfectoire?*" was the formula which was oftenest on her lips in those early days. And on the permission being given, Frances would valiantly return to the attack.

Supper presented fewer difficulties. A religious or biographical work was read aloud, and whilst giving her full attention to that, Frances found it easier to dispose of the pudding-basin full of soup and the mighty wedge of pudding or the vegetable stew which might form the repast.

But the ethics of the case still troubled her.

Finally she brought her difficulty to Mère Thérèse.

"You must eat in order to work, my child. Remember that you have entered an order where there is much manual labour to be done, and also the instruction of our poor people, our *dames pensionnaires* to attend to. Had you entered an order where physical austerity is the

first object, then indeed you would not complain of having too much.

"But tell me, my little Sister, is it not a greater hardship to you to follow the holy rule of obedience and eat all that is set before you, than it would be to deprive yourself of all but the bare necessities?"

She laughed shrewdly at Frances' conscious expression, and indeed no argument could have prevailed more strongly with the little novice. She learnt to look upon the completion of her meals as a task to be performed conscientiously, and felt a glow of triumph when she was able to wash the wooden fork and spoon and the blunt knife in her little pewter bowl of water, and place them in due order upon the table before the signal for rising was given.

The evening recreation which succeeded supper was a repetition of the morning one, and did not terminate until the clanging bell at eight o'clock proclaimed that the convent world had entered into "*le grand silence*," which would remain unbroken save for the most urgent necessity, until after Mass the following morning.

Collecting the manuals containing the office for the day from her tiny pigeon-hole, Frances would join the noiseless, softly hurrying throng of novices and descend to the chapel. On her knees at the high *prie-dieu*, which she would presently leave for a carved stall when the general recital of the office began, she embarked nightly upon the hardest struggle of her present existence—that against an overpowering need of sleep. Again and again Frances fell asleep while kneeling, only to wake instantly with a violent start, and force her eyelids, heavy as lead, to remain open over her filmed, unseeing eyes.

The novice in the stall next her, a Spanish child not yet nineteen, slumbered uneasily as unwillingly every night through the recital of Matins and Lauds, and one of Frances' most effective devices for keeping herself awake was that of gently pushing her neighbour into position when the nuns rose for the *Gloria Patri* that concluded every psalm.

She half envied little Sister Encarnación that uncom-

fortable three-quarters of an hour's sleep. For her own part, Frances never quite lost consciousness, although the curious intermittent buzzing in her head often prevented her from hearing her own voice joining in the psalms and hymns. But it was always with intense, though most involuntary, thankfulness, that she sank on to her knees for the last time, for the two or three moments silent devotion that preceded the final signal at which the novices rose and filed slowly, two by two, from the chapel. It was then generally some few minutes before half-past nine, but if the big clock on the stairs, which she passed every night, its ticking loud and portentous in the absolute silence, showed the hour to be even a very little later than usual, Frances was conscious of a purely physical sensation of sick dismay and resentment at the abridgement of her night.

In her cubicle she undressed as rapidly and silently as possible, and fell asleep almost as she lay down on her *paillasse*. To its iron hardness and the absence of any support but the smallest and stiffest of bolsters, she had never given a thought, since the first week when her arms and sides for a little while had shown the faint discoloration of bruises.

The days, regular and incessantly occupied, flew by with a rapidity that she had never known before, and it was always with a sort of shock of surprise that Frances greeted the arrival of each Saturday morning, the day which was marked for her by the unfailing arrival of Rosamund's weekly letter.

She had long ago, with tears, asked her sister to conform to the convent regulation, which did not extend its approval to more than one weekly letter from home for its novices, although no definite commands were issued except in the matter of the letters sent out. These might not exceed one every Sunday to a parent or guardian, and one a fortnight to a sister or brother. Frances, however, was permitted to reverse the custom, and it was to Rosamund that her Sunday letter was always addressed.

One of the strangest and hardest pangs that her torn and divided loyalty was to suffer, lay in the knowledge that no restriction was placed upon the correspondence

of a nun or novice and any other member of the Order, domiciled in "one of our houses abroad."

That this tie, strong and sacred although she believed it to be, should be held closer than that of blood, remained to Frances an incomprehensible and rather heartrending convention of which she shunned the thought as a temptation to disloyalty.

Her sense of proportion, like that of all those who lead the cloistered life, altered strangely and rapidly.

Her letters to Rosamund, the aching dread lest the new life should separate her irrevocably from Rosamund, the little tender recollections of their life together, of Lady Argent's kindness, of Hazel and her two babies, that had thronged her mind at first, had given place imperceptibly but with the strangest rapidity, to other preoccupations and other aspirations.

Nowadays, the things which mattered most were naturally those which filled the atmosphere into which she found herself transplanted.

The field of her external interests was naturally an extremely narrow one. The novice-mistress, the small society of her fellow-novices, and an occasional one or two of the older nuns, were the only human beings with whom she ever came into contact, and this intercourse, extremely limited as it was, took place either in one of the few rooms where speech was permitted, or in the narrow confines of the convent garden. It was as brief as possible, and was always, except when receiving direct spiritual guidance from Mère Thérèse, as impersonal as the sense of discipline on either part could make it.

Her small duties, for the faithful accomplishment of which she would receive no commendation, loomed enormous to Frances. She took a joyful pride in the thorough sweeping of the only long corridor which the house contained, and which had been given into her charge, and she looked forward anxiously to her bi-weekly mornings in the kitchen, where the lay sisters laughed furtively and good-naturedly at her utter ignorance of those primary laws of *le ménage* which never seemed to present any difficulties to her French and Spanish contemporaries. On two evenings a week she



taught in an elementary class of the poor school attached to the convent, and was gradually learning not to tremble at the apprehension that the six or seven-year-old urchins would decline to be instructed in the multiplication table by anyone so young and so frightened.

The novices, as a rule, were never sent amongst the lady boarders, but when she had been at the convent some four months, Frances was told that she was to work regularly under the Mère Econome. She thus found herself deputed occasionally to take an interview on behalf of the much-occupied Mère Caroline, so that she was not without fugitive intercourse with those whom she had soon learned to designate, in all due charity and perfectly unconscious arrogance, as "*les personnes du dehors*."

During these brief interviews the little novice was always highly conscious of the gulf which should lie between the manners of ordinary social intercourse and the demeanour of a young religious obliged through obedience to hold a needful conversation with an inhabitant of the outer world.

She was careful to say the prescribed *Ave Maria* to herself on the threshold of the small parlour where these conversations took place, and would enter holding herself unconsciously more upright than usual, her eyes down-cast, and her hands tucked away under her wide sleeves. It had frequently been impressed upon her that a religious "*ne s'affaise pas sur sa chaise comme si elle avait l'habitude des fauteuils*," and consequently she sat on the extreme edge of her chair, very much erect, and with her feet carefully concealed beneath the ample folds of her habit.

The business in hand she disposed of as rapidly as the extreme eloquence with which most of the lady boarders were afflicted, permitted.

It was no temptation to Frances to prolong the conversations in the parlour. She was naturally shy, and had, all her life, more or less unconsciously, preferred silence to speech.

She also became aware, as must all those who pursue a way of spiritual endeavour, that silence is the preliminary to concentration.



The atmosphere of the convent, which Frances had heard spoken of outside its walls as "peaceful" and "gentle" was, to her awakened perceptions, mainly one of intense concentration. The whole place, silent and monotonous, and even trivial in detail, was instinct with a force that seemed to vibrate through the stillness. Frances could discern this force in the chapel, in the refectory, most of all perhaps in the cold, narrow dormitory. The words which came oftenest to her mind were the "*Ego dormio: et cor meum vigilat*," painted in red letters a foot high on the whitewashed wall just above the narrow window.

She could not have spoken of this impression of tense unceasing life which for her lay behind all the convent routine, but she felt a new sensation as of being mentally at rest, as though she were at last able to share and recognize the scale of relative values prevailing in her surroundings.

Of the progress of her spiritual life she was scarcely aware. Frances was not introspective, and possessed that curious detachment from herself sometimes observable in extremely and fundamentally innocent personalities.

She listened to the instructions given, both general and particular, with the careful attention of a conscientious child, noted her failures to observe good resolutions in a tiny paper notebook kept in her pocket, and made it a matter of habit to observe scrupulously the more minute details of her daily duties.

She was naturally careful, and had been taught order by Mrs. Tregaskis, but her tendency to sit and dream was a source of much heart-searching to Frances.

"Vous êtes dans la lune, ma petite sœur," was a brisk reminder often uttered by Mère Thérèse, and Frances would return to earth with a guilty start and a few words of fervent contrition and resolution in her heart.

When the winter was drawing to a close, and Frances had been at the Convent nearly six months, Mère Thérèse spoke to her of her *prise d'habit*. The ceremony, goal of every novice's thoughts, was the first stage of the religious life proper. The novice exchanged her own

name for a religious one bestowed upon her by the Superior, her hair was cut off, and the white Cross of her Order fastened upon the front of her habit. It was the preliminary step to the vows which she would take later on.

"Oh, ma Mère!" stammered Frances, her face one flush of joy.

"I think so, little one. I have spoken to Notre Mère Supérieure, and the ceremony will probably be for Easter Monday . . . you must be very, very fervent. . . ."

Frances lay awake till dawn, heavy with sleep, yet too much excited to sleep, and thanking God with all the fervour of her innocent heart.

"*Ma Mère*, may one ask whether any of Sister Frances' family are coming for the ceremony to-morrow!" inquired the American novice at the evening recreation on Easter Sunday.

"Her sister is coming for the day, and perhaps a friend. The poor child has no parents."

"Perhaps that is as well," said a little French novice calmly. "It is such a sacrifice for the parents, however pious, and the thought of their grief must be a distraction."

Her neighbour, a placid Spanish girl, looked surprised. In Andalusia the parents of the *Lola* or *Pepita* who had "*la vocacion*" would let her go with pride and joy, although they could not, like these rich Americans, hope to see her for the yearly visit permitted by the regulations, when, as would probably happen at the end of her novitiate, she should be sent away to some house of the Order overseas. She herself had only left home some few months ago, but even her little sister *Conchita*, who was only ten, had been too glad of the great honour and joy of seeing *Maria* a nun, to cry at losing her. But she kept her thoughts to herself and remained silent.

The American novice, with a sudden recollection that hurt like a physical pang, of a lonely, bewildered old couple in New England, as unrelenting, as uncomprehending in their condemnation of their only daughter's lapse into an alien and idolatrous creed, quickly changed the conversation by asking another question of *Mère Thérèse*.

"What name is she to receive, *ma Mère*?"

"Supposing you try to guess?"

The novice-mistress looked cheerfully at one smiling face after another, as the novices vied with one another in childish enjoyment.

"Sœur Aimée, ma Mère! We have no one of that name."

"'Innocente' would suit her, I think," said the American.

"Is it a double name, ma Mère?"

"Yes."

"Ah, then one of them is Mary!"

Mère Thérèse nodded.

"Mary Emmanuel!"

"Elizabeth Mary."

The old nun shook her head, still laughing heartily.

"Lolita Maria," exclaimed the little Spanish novice of eighteen who was Frances' neighbour in the chapel, selecting the names she thought the prettiest.

There was a fresh burst of merriment.

"*Pour une novice anglaise, ah, par exemple!*"

*Une religieuse qui s'appellerait Lolita! Ce serait gentil!*"

Sœur Encarnación looked self-conscious, and the novice-mistress said at once:

"Come, my children, you are not very wide awake. We have only five minutes more—I see that I must help you. What do we call our little *retraitante* at present?"

"Sister Frances!"

"She is keeping her own name, then?"

"Could she have a better one? St. Francis of Assisi—dear St. Francis of Sales—what a collection of patrons to choose from."

"Is it Frances Mary or Mary Frances, ma Mère?" inquired the American, whose baptismal names were Belinda Oriane, and upon whom had been bestowed the appellation of Sister Perpetua.

"Frances Mary," replied the novice-mistress, rising from her seat, at which signal work was instantly folded into baskets and silence resumed.

Frances was making the five days Retreat which preceded the ceremony of her *prise d'habit*.

She was serenely happy.

There was no doubt in her mind with regard to the step which she was about to take. It was merely a longed-for milestone on the road to the attainment of

her heart's desire. Although more conscious than ever before, during these few days pause in the activity of her daily life, of an intense physical fatigue, she felt strangely uplifted in spirit, and as though newly inspired with a spiritual energy which might overcome that rock in the way of salvation, her physical frailty.

Strangely mingled with her exaltation of mind, was a trivial, childish feeling of dread lest Rosamund might find her altered. She assured herself in vain that she had not changed in any way that could strike her sister with a sense of alteration. But she knew that her whole perspective had changed, and that what was to her the reality of life would seem no more to Rosamund than a mysterious, and rather futile, phase.

She found herself wondering, wistfully and rather nervously, what the regulations would be as to conduct in the parlour.

That her interview with Rosamund, brief though it was to be, would be fraught with these, Frances could not doubt. In letters to her sister, she had again and again to consider the injunctions laid upon every nun or novice of the Order. Terms of excessive endearment, exaggerated expressions of affection or solicitude, were alike unbecoming to a religious, and of all the many details of her daily life that Rosamund longed to know and Frances to impart, only a very few, and those of the least personal character, did not come under the ban of convent secrecy. The letters were always signed by the writer's full "name in religion."

Frances, during the hour allotted to letter-writing on Sundays, had often seen her American neighbour, in the unavoidable proximity of the small, closely-ranged desks, crying silently over those difficult letters, which in her case were never answered. Frances surmised involuntarily that the changed handwriting, forced to conform to a sloping, pointed, French model, the stilted phraseology which was the inevitable outcome of that enforced reserve, the strange signature, with its orthodox preface, "Your loving child in Christ," were so many additional pangs to those who understood no conventual shibboleths and resented with a resentment that was the more bitter

for its utter lack of comprehension, being robbed of child or sister.

Rosamund would understand, Frances had told herself passionately, inditing those first strange little letters, that made her heart ache for the disappointment they must carry with them. And that Rosamund *had* understood she knew from her replies, guarded and restrained enough, but breathing no hint of doubt or perplexity.

All letters to or from the members of the novitiate were, of course, examined by the novice-mistress, as were those of the professed nuns by the Superior. Nor was this censorship a nominal one. Mère Thérèse understood Spanish as well as French, and had a fair knowledge of English, but twice already Frances had been told to translate various unintelligible portions of her correspondence. Once, only a few weeks ago, she had heard the calm habitual silence of the little room where the novices' desks were ranged against the wall violently broken by the noise of sudden uncontrollable sobbing. Frances blamed herself that she had not had the presence of mind to keep that custody of the eyes enjoined by every precept and practice of the religious life, but she had raised her head quickly and instinctively, and had seen Sœur Marie-Edmée crying hysterically over the torn pieces of a letter lying on her desk.

It was not difficult to guess that her letter to the anxious, waiting mother or little sister in the South of France had been found unsuitably unrestrained or full of indiscreet detail, and would not be sent that week.

But Sœur Marie-Edmée was from Marseilles, impulsive and emotional, and very soon afterwards she had disappeared from the novitiate.

The novices were told, as was customary in such cases, that her health was not equal to the strain of the religious life.

Frances thought again how terrible a breakdown of health which should necessitate leaving the convent would be. She was sincerely convinced that to one who had tried the cloistered life, existence "in the world" must be unendurable.

She remembered how often Mère Thérèse had said

briskly: "Où Dieu donne la vocation, il donne la santé," and reflected with perfect simplicity that it would really only be necessary for her health to hold out until after her final vows, which she hoped to take in three years time. She knew that many of the older professed nuns suffered almost permanently from disease, mostly of the digestive system, and almost all had to endure the nightly torture of senses atrophied and nerves strained by the want of sufficient sleep, but very few of them ever broke down, even for a day or two.

After all, thought Frances, what did it matter once the earthly goal attained? One entered the religious life in order to give oneself to God. Should He not take toll of the life dedicated to Him as best He pleased?

She waited for this first ceremony which should mark her entrance into the road of self-immolation with no shadow of apprehension.

Easter Monday dawned clear and cloudless.

Immediately after the first Mass, Frances was summoned to Mère Thérèse's room and told that the ceremony was to take place at midday.

"Your sister will arrive, with Lady Argent, very soon after ten, so you must go to them in the parlour for a few moments," she said considerably. "Then, of course, after the ceremony, you can return to them again."

Frances, far more overwrought than she knew, found it impossible to command her thoughts that morning. She went about her work with her mind in a tumult, often referring to the tiny notebook in her pocket, in which she had written down various things that she wanted to say to Rosamund. When Advent came, and Lent, now that she was really a novice, Frances would not be able to write or receive any letters during these seasons, so Rosamund must not expect to hear from her. Rosamund was to ask to see Mère Thérèse, and be very, very nice to her, because Mère Thérèse had been so good to Frances. Would Rosamund send some fern-roots from Porthlew as soon as she got back? They would be so nice in the garden, where no flowers would ever grow. Frances was allowed an extra half-hour in the garden

almost every day, because she was used to fresh air. It would please Rosamund to hear that.

Then Frances heard the sound of a motor in the street below. She might not look out of the window, but her heart beat violently, and she could not but strain her ears for the sound of the front-door bell.

It came.

She wondered whether she ought to go on sweeping the corridor, and if the lay sister in charge of the parlour would know where to find her. But when old Sister Louise finally creaked slowly upstairs, she only smiled and nodded at the little novice with her long-handled broom, and went to knock at Mère Thérèse's door.

Frances heard "Entrez!" and then through the open door the clear incisive accents of her novice-mistress.

"Un petit moment, ma sœur! Je vous appellerai tout-de-suite."

Evidently she was engaged in the direction of one of her flock.

Old Sister Louise retired submissively, closing the door again. She leant her tired old body against the wall, and then suddenly straightened it again with an effort and stood wearily, her weight leaning on one foot, fingering the brown rosary that hung from her girdle and slowly praying with moving lips and closed eyes.

Frances finished the last few yards of corridor. "Sœur Louise!" came from the novice-mistress's room.

This time Sister Louise shut the door behind her as she went in to deliver the message.

Frances, her heart beating violently and a mist before her eyes, went and put her broom away in its accustomed corner.

She dawdled unconsciously, to delay the moment when she must return to the more remote community-room belonging to the novitiate. Then the door of Mère Thérèse's room opened, and Frances heard her say:

"Très bien, très bien. Cherchez-moi cette petite."

"Elle est là, Mère Thérèse."

Frances came forward quickly.

"You are needed in the parlour," said her novice-mistress smiling. "Go with Sister Louise, my child."



Frances turned, still blindly, to follow the old lay-sister.

"Your apron—your sleeves," muttered Sister Louise in a scandalized whisper.

With fingers that shook, Frances took off the black apron and sleeves that protected her habit. She folded them and laid them in the accustomed pigeon-hole.

How slowly Sister Louise creaked downstairs! With what deliberation she turned, in the hall, to make mysterious signs that should not infringe the rule of silence, and should yet convey a communication.

Frances gazed at her in an agony. What further delay was this?

Suddenly she understood that her habit was still tucked up over her petticoat as it had been while she swept the corridor.

She caught at the folds round her waist and pulled them down, her hands shaking uncontrollably.

Sœur Louise's hand was actually on the parlour-door  
NOW.

Suddenly she turned to the novice and whispered huskily:

*"N'oubliez pas votre Ave Maria."*

Frances stared at her for an instant and then put her hand across her eyes.

She never knew what it was that she said.

The next moment the door was open and she was in the parlour, with Rosamund.

Neither of them knew how long that first eager clasp endured, neither was in the least conscious of the presence of Lady Argent, gazing, already tearful, out of the window.

When at last she turned from her lengthy contemplation, Frances was seated, flushed and trembling a little, but sedate in her ample white habit, and Rosamund was kneeling on the floor beside her, their hands tightly locked together.

It always struck Frances afterwards with a curious sense of incongruity that her first words, after that prolonged gaze, should have been uttered in a strangely shaking little voice:

"Oh, Rosamund, you've got on new clothes that I've never seen before!"

It was the odd, trivial expression of the enormous interval that lay between their life together and the new evolution of Frances.

Then Lady Argent kissed them both and said:

"My dearest child, you look just exactly the same, and yet so utterly different, and the habit and everything—so absolutely natural to see you in it, and so very strange, dear—you know what I mean. I never was so glad of anything in my life, only, of course, one knows there is no joy without sacrifice, and, my dear, you really look better than I've ever seen you. Are you quite well?"

"Are you happy?" asked Rosamund.

"Oh, yes," Frances replied fervently to both questions.

"I'm so happy—it's everything I ever thought it would be—only better. And I'm very, very well. I haven't seen myself in a looking-glass, but they all say I'm fatter than when I came."

"So you are," said Rosamund doubtfully. "Your face is much rounder, but you're very black under your eyes, darling."

"Am I?" replied Frances laughing a little, and instinctively putting up her hand to the tell-tale eyes.

Lady Argent fumbled in her satin bag.

"My dear, if it isn't absolutely against the rule, and I really don't think it can be, would you like to see yourself in my little tiny hand-mirror? To think you've never seen yourself in the glass since you came here! And really the habit is so very becoming, though how you ever get your veil straight without a glass—not that a little one this size would be any use, only my maid and Ludovic always insist on my carrying it about with me because of my hat, you know. To keep it straight," Lady Argent explained with a gentle push which drove her black toque over her left ear.

Frances laid the little mirror gently on her lap without looking into it. She did not know if the use of a looking-glass was for ever forbidden to a nun, but she felt no desire to risk a transgression of the rule.

"How long can you stay with us?" asked Rosamund wistfully.

Frances started painfully—she had forgotten to inquire.

"I don't know," she faltered. "You see, the *prise d'habit* is at twelve, and it's nearly eleven now. They will want me to go and get ready." She gazed at Rosamund, wondering if her sister would think her more occupied with the observance of convent etiquette than with their meeting. That no such lack of comprehension was Rosamund's was evident in her reassuring, "Of course, darling. Do you think you ought to go and find out when they'll want you?"

Only the look in her eyes spoke the effort of sacrificing any of those few precious moments together, and Frances' heart went out to her in passionate gratitude.

"Why can't I ask to see Mother Theresa?" inquired Lady Argent. "I should like to see her, and then you can talk to Rosamund, dear, and we can find out all about how much time you can give us—but, of course, as it's only one day like this, they're sure to send you for the whole time—so much more satisfactory, I always think, than half-an-hour here and there and then rushing away because some dreadful little bell has rung and leaving one to look for hours at those very uninteresting photographs of Rome and places, in enormous albums. You know the sort of thing, my dear; I can see two of them on that big table over there. Don't move, either of you. I'm going to find the portress and ask for Mother Theresa."

Lady Argent left them.

It seemed to Frances only a few moments later that she reappeared, and Mère Thérèse was with her.

The novice rose to her feet.

After a very little conversation, Mère Thérèse looked towards Frances, who said instantly:

"Is it time for me to go, ma Mère?"

"I fear so, my child. You know that there is a grand *toilette* to be made to-day. But you will return to *ces dames* at once after the ceremony, and remain until they go."

"Oh, thank you," breathed Rosamund, gazing at her sister.

Mère Thérèse looked at the two faces, so singularly alike in colouring and outline. "*C'est gentil*," she said gently to Lady Argent, "*deux sœurs qui s'aiment si bien*."

Then Frances went quietly out of the parlour and upstairs again.

She was aware that tears were very near her eyes, and that she understood why some of the novices had said: "*Ah ! les familles, un jour de prise d'habit*——" and had left the sentence unfinished except for an ominous shake of the head.

But she was also deeply and ardently thankful.

Nothing was changed between her and Rosamund. She thought with compassionate amazement of a *prise d'habit* she had seen during her first week in the novitiate, when the novices had been asked to pray especially for their companion because her father and mother, non-Catholic, had refused to come to the ceremony or to send any token of forgiveness to the daughter who had taken her own way at the bidding of her conscience, and in defiance of her parents.

Even Cousin Bertie had written a very kind letter which Frances had received that morning, bidding God bless her in the way that she had chosen, and only asking her to remember that there was always a home waiting for her at Porthlew, and a welcome when, or if ever, she should come back there.

Hazel had written too, a very affectionate letter, and asked if she might send Frances anything for a present, whatever would be nicest and most useful, and would Frances always remember that good people were needed in the world dreadfully badly, and if she ever came out of the convent, and wanted somewhere to go to, she must come straight to Hazel, who would always love to have her.

They all wrote of her leaving the convent ! Only Rosamund, the novice reflected, never said, or seemed to think, that Frances had mistaken her vocation.

Kneeling for an instant at the little shrine that stood

outside the door of the dormitory, Frances thanked God for Rosamund, and prayed fervently that the step she was about to take that day might be blessed for them both.

"And some day—together again," she ended on a stifled sob.

Then she went quietly into the dormitory.

### XXIII

FRANCES could not help feeling that it was as well that her Retreat had officially ended that morning after the first Mass, for no further opportunity was vouchsafed her for reflection.

A French lay-sister, to whom the office was always entrusted, came to dress her in the wedding-dress of cheap white satin, convent-made, and long white lace veil.

She found the little novice with all her soft straight brown hair hanging over her shoulders.

"Ah!" said Sœur Eugénie, "au moins vous serez quitte de tout cela demain!" She picked up a strand of the long silken mass and let it fall again disdainfully.

"What a joy, to have finished with one's *coiffure* for ever!" she remarked complacently. Then she produced hairpins which had served in the same capacity many times before, and twisted the novice's hair into a species of strange outstanding chignon which had been fashionable some forty years previously in Paris.

"Vous voila!" she said triumphantly, when Frances had suffered under her vigorous ministrations for what seemed a long while.

She produced a small, very old, folding mirror, and Frances gazed in silence at the monstrous erection. She was more distressed on Rosamund's account than on her own, and tried surreptitiously to pull and coax the strained-back hair over her forehead and temples.

When the dress and veil were fastened she looked at herself in the glass again and saw with relief that the coarse lace draped over her head and face was thick enough to conceal Sœur Eugénie's disastrous manifestations of her skill. Then she pulled on the white cotton gloves that lay on the bed and tried to collect her thoughts whilst waiting to be summoned to the chapel.

It distressed her a little that her mind should still be vibrating from that little while with Rosamund. Nevertheless she was aware of an increasing happiness that seemed to pervade her soul, and to make all lesser, more surface preoccupations, of no account.

In a few moments she heard the brisk and heavy tread of the novice-mistress, and rose to meet her.

Mère Thérèse looked at her very kindly, said "*Vous êtes contente, chère petite ?*" more as though stating a fact than asking a question, and on the monosyllabic but heartfelt reply of the novice, blessed her very tenderly. Then she took her downstairs. Frances followed her obediently to an unaccustomed entrance of the chapel, that which was used by the professed nuns, the lady boarders and visitors to the convent.

The novices always went in and out by a small side-door, which gave directly on to that part of the chapel where the community stalls were placed.

But Frances knew that for a *prise d'habit* the double doors at the end of the chapel would be opened, and that she must pass up the narrow aisle thronged on either side by visitors, and through the light oaken framework of screen behind which stood the harmonium and the small choir of nuns and novices, and up to the steps of the Sanctuary.

Rosamund and Lady Argent would be each provided with a *prie-dieu* just in front of the railings, where they could see and hear to the best possible advantage.

"Wait here," whispered Mère Thérèse, well versed in every corner of the intricate and inconveniently built house.

She beckoned Frances into a small angular nook that served as a little lobby, between the main entrance to the chapel and the narrow staircase leading to the wing of the house reserved for the lady boarders.

"No one will disturb you. The ladies are all in the chapel already. Father Anselm has just arrived. You are quite ready?"

"Yes," said Frances gently.

Mère Thérèse, grown strangely materialistic, all the practical Frenchwoman in her to the fore, arranged the

modest train where it would be least crushed, and put back the veil that Frances had kept down.

"Vous étoufferiez !" she remarked matter-of-factly. Then she smoothed back the hair already strained away from Frances' temples, said "Voilà !" in tones of satisfaction, and prepared to leave the novice alone.

Her parting instructions were:

"I will myself be awaiting you at the chapel doors when you hear the first notes of the *Ave Maris Stella*. Do not forget to put your veil down and walk slowly."

Frances, left alone, sank into the only available seat. She felt very tired.

She wondered whether Rosamund was already in the chapel, and wished that she had tried to explain the ceremonial of a *prise d'habit* to her sister. Then she derided herself for supposing that their brief moments of intercourse could have been spent thus. Besides, she remembered with relief, Lady Argent would have told Rosamund what to expect, and there were doubtless innumerable little paper booklets of an explanatory nature at the disposal of visitors.

She strove to concentrate her mind on higher thoughts, but only realized afresh, at the failure of the effort, her own excessive fatigue, part physical and part emotional.

Presently the stairs began to shake, and a creaking, ponderous sound of descent became audible.

Frances straightened herself, and reflected with dismay that she was entirely visible to anyone coming down-stairs.

She closed her eyes, and began to say the Rosary, trying in vain to fix her attention on the words she uttered mechanically.

The heavy footsteps became incredibly loud, and then paused in front of her.

"Now don't," said Mrs. Mulholland's voice, "don't let me disturb you, my dear. Don't move—don't stir—not one word, my dear, though, of course, there's no actual rule of silence for you just now, to-day. If there were, I shouldn't be speaking to you, that goes without saying. But we're not in silence for a clothing."

Frances, convinced that Mrs. Mulholland knew all the



convent regulations at least as well as did the Superior herself, rose, smiling a little.

"That's right," said Mrs. Mulholland zealously, "that's right. Now, there's just one word I wanted to say—I'm not going to keep you one moment—not that they're quite ready for you yet in the chapel. Mère Pauline isn't in her place and won't be, either, for a moment or two. She's detained."

Frances wondered, not for the first time, whence was the source of the mysterious information that always seemed to be at Mrs. Mulholland's finger-tips concerning the movements of the community, both individually and collectively.

"I knew I should find you here," pursued the triumphant old voice. "I delayed coming down on purpose, so as to catch you. I knew, my dear. The novices always wait just here for the '*Ave Maris Stella*' to begin—have done for years. I've seen about twenty *prises d'habits* in my time—some of them lay-sisters, some of them choir-sisters. One or two of them have left, you know, even *after* taking the holy Habit of the Order. One English novice we had went away just when she ought to have been taking her first vows. Found she had no real vocation, you know. But there's no fear of that with you, my dear, is there? From the first time I saw you here for the Retreat last year, with that nice friend of yours who wasn't a Catholic, poor thing, I always said 'Miss Grantham has the vocation. Mark my words,' I said, 'Miss Grantham has the vocation. She'll come back here one of these days,' I said. And sure enough! Well, well, well, you look very happy, my dear, *and* in the right place."

"I think so," said Frances, smiling at her.

"That's it, that's it. Ah well, there's nothing like God's Holy Will," said Mrs. Mulholland with an enthusiasm which was none the less ardent for sounding strangely vague. "If He'd thought fit to call me to the religious life—but no doubt I wasn't worthy. That's what I always say—not worthy."

Mrs. Mulholland's voice became cheerfully resigned. "But there it is," she said with the air of one reaching

a conclusion, "there it is. One is taken, and the other left. And your dear sister here for the ceremony and all."

"Please pray for her, that she mayn't mind too much," said Frances, her eyes suddenly filling with tears. "She isn't a Catholic."

"Ah well, the sacrifice that you're both making may bring a blessing on her—no doubt it will. And tell me, my dear, what about that nice friend of yours, Mrs. Severing, who came for the Retreat last year? I hoped we were going to see her to-day."

"She couldn't come, but she wrote to me."

"Ah! Couldn't leave the poor son, I dare say. Very likely—very likely," said Mrs. Mulholland with lugubrious sagacity. "But she'll have your good prayers, my dear, and you know you'll never be refused anything on your clothing day. That's really what I came to ask you—to say a little word for a very special intention of mine. Will you do that, my dear?"

"Of course I will," said Frances, gently and cordially.

Mrs. Mulholland fumbled for a moment in her enormous pocket and then drew forth a folded piece of paper.

"Now just let me pin that inside your waistbelt, and I shall be quite happy. I've just dotted down the intention—initials only, you know—but the Lord will understand. I should like you to have it on you, my dear, and you can burn it afterwards, you know."

Frances submitted to Mrs. Mulholland's rather heavy-handed manipulation of the old-fashioned ribbon-band round her waist.

"There now! God bless you, and pray for me; and one thing more, my dear: You can count on me to say a few words to your sister. Just a little word of sympathy, or explanation, to show her that we Catholics——"

There came a sudden sound of voices uplifted in unison from the chapel.

"*Ave Maris Stella!*" exclaimed Mrs. Mulholland, and made Frances precede her out of the narrow lobby.

Thereafter it seemed to Frances that she was conscious of nothing so much as of the activities of Mrs. Mulholland. It was Mrs. Mulholland who gave her, as it were, into the hands of Mère Thérèse, waiting at the entrance of the

chapel, muttering hoarsely: "Here she is, ma Mère, here she is. Pray for me, dear."

It was Mrs. Mulholland who squeezed hastily past her into the chapel and made vehement signals that she was to advance, and it was Mrs. Mulholland who, by some agency known only to herself, had caused her own large *prie-dieu* to be transferred from its customary corner in the back of the church to the best possible coign of vantage in a line with those of Lady Argent and Rosamund.

Even as the "*Ave Maris Stella*" pealed through the chapel, and she came slowly up the narrow aisle, it seemed to Frances that the husky, heartfelt tones of Mrs. Mulholland sounded above everybody else's.

And it was undoubtedly Mrs. Mulholland who was whisking about the leaves of the little books on either side of her, and guiding her neighbours with an explanatory forefinger.

The little procession of acolytes, preceding the tall tonsured figure of the Prior of Twickenham, came into the Sanctuary, and Frances sank upon her knees on the red velvet cushion before the steps.

And it was only a few moments later, when the customary prayers had been recited, that she felt a pull at the back of her dress, and heard the ubiquitous voice of Mrs. Mulholland behind her.

"Sit down, sit down. He's going to give the address now."

Frances sat down, and Mrs. Mulholland leant forward at an angle that suffused her large old face with crimson, and arranged the train of her dress under the chair.

Father Anselm's address was very short and simple. There was much that was practical in it, and Frances felt vaguely relieved that it should contain no mystical allusions that might vex or distress Rosamund. This our sister, said the Prior, was about to take a step which, though to the outward eye might seem more striking, with its symbolical dress, than the more simple ceremony of a Profession, was nevertheless only a preliminary step. The goal of our sister's religious life was still before her—

those vows which should bind her irrevocably to the life to which she had been called.

Poverty, Chastity, Obedience. The vow of Poverty, which would not only mean the relinquishment of worldly goods and possessions, but also that poverty of spirit which should claim no rights and no belongings in this world, not even the rights of personal judgment, the disposal of self. . . . Then the vow of Chastity, which would discipline our sister's earthly affections, rendering them indeed not less ardent, but more supernatural—a wide and universal charity which should include all . . . our sister had given up her earthly family ties: good and sacred as they were, the relinquishment of them was better still—but her family now would be the poor, the sick, the friendless—in all and each she would see and love God Himself. Finally, the vow of Obedience. Our sister would see the Will of God in the will of her Superior, and would gladly submit to it in greater as in smaller things. In the Order which our sister had joined, a nun might be sent at a moment's notice to some far-off country, there to live and work and perhaps die, without return to the land of her birth. But her home was not here—it was in the Heaven, towards which every step of the way was leading her . . . where, as the Scriptures themselves had promised, she would receive again a hundredfold all that she had given up for Christ's sake.

The Prior's voice ceased, and he turned again towards the Altar.

The time had come for Frances to reply to the few formal questions that would be put to her. She did so quite steadily, although her voice sounded strange in her own ears.

Then the habit which she was shortly to don was blessed, and Prior Anselm fumbled with the scissors and somehow cut from her head the symbolical lock of hair.

Mère Thérèse held back her veil as he did so, but Frances was conscious of Mrs. Mulholland hovering over her officiously.

Then she turned and slowly followed the Superior and Mère Thérèse into the little adjoining Sacristy where

Sœur Eugénie was waiting to divest her of her white satin dress and lace veil, and help her into the garb which would henceforth be hers for life.

The white Cross, distinguishing mark of the Order, gleamed upon her breast now.

She lifted the linen *coiffe*, ingeniously pinned together, that bound her head under the veil, but Sœur Eugénie, laughing a little, pointed to her late handiwork, still erect upon the head of the novice.

"Allons," said Mère Thérèse, and began to take out hairpins, careful to let none fall on the floor, where it might possibly be overlooked or swept away.

Then the lay-sister put a dustsheet over Frances' shoulders and quickly cropped off the lengths of her brown hair.

The feeling of coolness and comfort was pleasant when the veil was again on her head, but Frances gave one curious fleeting pang to the memory of that soft mass, lying strewn about the dustsheet.

The little Superior, who had been busying herself with the white artificial wreath of roses that lay ready, turned round.

"Sister Frances Mary"—she greeted the novice by her new name—"God bless you, my dear daughter."

Frances knelt for a moment to receive her Superior's embrace, and then turned to Mère Thérèse.

"Et maintenant," said that practical woman, as ever consecrating the briefest possible time to emotion, however permissible,—"*le baiser de paix aux sœurs.*"

This exercise was one which Frances had always viewed with some slight apprehension.

The newly invested novice, bearing a lighted candle, made the round of the community, each nun and lay-sister standing at her stall in the chapel, also the bearer of a lighted candle, and exchanged with each the symbolical kiss of peace.

A nervous dread of the effect of so many lighted wax candles on inflammable veils and music scores sent the blood to Frances' head and made her slow progress round the chapel a painful one, but the older nuns proved expert

at holding veils out of possible contact with candle-grease, and moreover to her great relief, the draught of these repeated salutations extinguished several tapers, including her own.

As she returned thankfully to her *prie-dieu*, Mrs. Mulholland, who had mysteriously become possessed of a full-sized candle, leant forward and determinedly applied its flame to Frances' cold and extinguished taper.

Frances smiled at her gently, and Mrs. Mulholland subsided into her seat again and blew her nose with a vigorous, trumpet-like sound denoting considerable emotion. Then the Prior read the concluding prayers and placed upon Frances' head the wreath of artificial white roses, where it balanced insecurely until Mrs. Mulholland again sprang from her seat and affixed it to the novice's veil with a couple of safety-pins apparently produced by miraculous means from her person.

The *Te Deum* pealed through the chapel in conclusion, and then, as the community filed out in the customary order, two by two, Frances was left for a few moments to the solitude and quiet which her whole soul craved.

Her head bent and her hands tightly clasped, she made her earnest ardent thanksgiving, her simple, fervent resolution to try and be worthy of all that she had received, her tender, childlike petitions for those whom she loved, for all those for whom she had promised to pray, for that religious order which she was hereafter to count, in all its scattered branches, as her earthly home.

She lost herself in a dreamy contentment that was half contemplation and half the mental inertia following on prolonged physical and emotional strain. It was almost as though rousing herself from sleep that she heard a whispered summons to the parlour, and rose obediently to follow the lay-sister out of the chapel.

Scarcely less dreamlike was the afternoon spent in Rosamund's company, when Frances took her once or twice round the tiny garden, showed her, in obedience to Mère Pauline's recommendations, the poor school and the portion of the house reserved for lady boarders, and returned with her to the parlour, where Lady Argent

serenely voluble, was entertained by such of the nuns as could spare quarter of an hour.

"I can't see your part of the house, and where you sleep, can I?" asked Rosamund.

It was almost the first suggestion that she had made, and Frances divined in her an intense anxiety lest she should unwittingly distress the novice by proposals or requests contrary to the mysterious rule of which she knew so little.

"No, of course not," she added almost immediately, her eyes on her sister's face. "I expect you're not allowed to have visitors up to your cell."

There was only the faintest sound of hope underlying the suggestion now.

"I'm afraid not," said Frances rather mournfully. "But there's nothing to see, really. It's only a little cubicle in a long dormitory."

She wondered rather nervously immediately afterwards whether she ought to have given even that information. There was so much that might not be discussed outside the community, and it was so strange to feel such restriction in her intercourse with Rosamund.

At four o'clock Frances was called away to Vespers, and tea was brought to the visitors, and at five Lady Argent said gently:

"My dears, I am going to make a little visit to the chapel, and in about twenty minutes time I am afraid our cab will be here. Will you come and fetch me?"

"Let's go into the chapel together for a minute," whispered Frances, when the last quarter of an hour had sped past them.

They knelt at the back of the little chapel, Frances still conscious of exultation in the joint sacrifice that both were making. She prayed ardently for her sister and for herself.

The door opened behind them, and the ubiquitous Mrs. Mulholland sank heavily upon her knees beside Frances.

"The cab is here," she whispered hoarsely; "and Mère Pauline and Mère Thérèse are in the hall. You'd better come, my dear."

Frances bent her head, the crown of white roses still on her veil, and an instant later she rose, and left the chapel with Rosamund and Lady Argent.

The Superior herself had come to bid her guests farewell, and she spoke kindly to Rosamund, and said that she must come and pay her sister a visit again next year.

But Mère Thérèse drew Rosamund aside and gave her a little silver medal. "*Comme souvenir de ce beau jour, de la part de Sœur Françoise Marie,*" she said.

Rosamund thanked her, and Frances heard her ask the novice-mistress in strangled accents if her sister seemed really happy.

"*Mais oui, mais oui. Voyez comme elle a bonne mine. La santé, c'est un signe de vocation,*" asseverated Mère Thérèse.

"I am really happy—I am in the right place," Frances said softly.

She was tense with the determination that no sign of distress at parting should add to Rosamund's sense of loss.

The novice-mistress looked at both small, set faces, alike in spite of Frances' coiffe and veil, and said approvingly:

"*Voilà un sacrifice fait avec courage, n'est ce pas ?*"

Then Lady Argent kissed Frances, with murmured blessings and endearments, and went down the steps to the waiting cab.

The Superior had already hastened away in obedience to another call.

Mère Thérèse embraced Rosamund, assured her that she would pray for her, and turned aside for a moment while the sisters exchanged their speechless farewell.

Frances stood on the steps, with the novice-mistress immediately behind her, and watched the cab move slowly away from the convent door, Rosamund still gazing at her from the window.

Both faces, tense and colourless, were smiling until the cab was lost to sight.

The novice-mistress looked at Frances kindly, but she did not say anything except:



"Go and put on your apron, Sister, and help Sœur Léonide in the refectory. She has been delayed and requires assistance."

Frances went.

She made little acts of resignation in her own mind as she went, and said "Fiat Voluntas tua," but tears, such as she had not shed since the first strange days of her novitiate, were choking her, and fell thick and blinding as she donned her black apron and went into the refectory.

Old Sœur Léonide said "Pauvre chou!" when she saw her, and immediately stuck a pin into her sleeve in order to remind herself that she must do penance for having spoken unnecessarily.

Then she showed Frances what had to be done, and they worked quickly and in silence until the bell rang.

At the evening recreation the novices all congratulated Frances, and called her "Sœur Françoise Marie," and she was ashamed of the tears that she could not stop, although no one made any comment on them.

The evening recital of the office calmed her at last, and she again renewed her offering of herself and of all that she held dear.

That night, in the dormitory, she had occasion to go to the can of luke-warm water that stood beside the uncurtained window at the end of the long room. Forgetful for a moment of her surroundings, Frances looked out on the still patch of garden lying below, bathed in a white flood of moonlight.

Just so had she seen the garden at Porthlew on summer evenings, just so would it be flooded now. The same white light would stream now, strong and peaceful, over that smaller garden, on a hill above the Wye Valley. It was perhaps visible from the surroundings, unknown to Frances, amidst which Rosamund now was.

The thought, which was a sufficiently obvious one, suddenly struck Frances, in her overwrought state, as strange and piteous.

She looked out at the moonlit garden with a rush of longing and sorrow for Rosamund.

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A great clock outside struck the half-hour with a loud clang, making her start violently.

Half-past nine—and it was the evening of her *prise d'habit*.

Sister Frances Mary turned from the window and went into her cell.

## XXIV

"IPHIGENIA," said Ludovic Argent in London that evening.

His mother looked distressed.

"My dearest boy, I do wish you wouldn't call her that. It would make Rosamund more unhappy than she is already, if she heard you, and, besides, dear little Frances isn't in the least like any heathen goddess of that sort. Not that I quite know what Iphigenia ever did, but I'm sure from your tone that it was something dreadful, and enough to expel her from any decent religious order."

"She was only very young—and innocent—and sacrificed," said Ludovic.

"Just as I say!" untruly remarked Lady Argent, in a tone of triumph. "Most unlike Frances, who is as happy as she can be, and made her sacrifice entirely of her own free will, as you perfectly well know. Unless, Ludovic, you want to make me think that you still believe in those shocking old myths of nuns being walled up alive and lured into convents because of their fortunes, which one knows perfectly well never happened at all, even in the Middle Ages, let alone nowadays with Government inspections and sanitary improvements and everything."

"No, I don't think they're walling her up, mother," Ludovic allowed, with the shadow of a smile crossing his habitually melancholy face. "But when you say she's made her sacrifice of her own free will—well, she doesn't yet know what it is that she's giving up, does she?"

"Perhaps," said Lady Argent with a sort of wistful decision that gave unwonted lucidity to her utterance, "perhaps she knows what she's gaining, better than what she's giving up, Ludovic."

Ludovic found no reply.

Presently he asked: "Where is Miss Grantham?"

"I sent her upstairs as soon as we got back. Ludovic, I wish I knew what to do for her. She minds this dreadfully, poor child, and it's so difficult to make her see it from a Catholic point of view. She was very, very good and brave, for fear of distressing her sister, but she kept on getting whiter and whiter, and in a way it was really a relief when we got away from the convent, and she could relax that dreadful strain."

"It's hard on her."

"Dreadfully," said Lady Argent, with tears in her eyes. "You see, what can one say to comfort her? Talking about the Will of God seems such a mockery, when she isn't a Catholic."

"My dear mother! Catholics haven't got a monopoly of the Will of God."

"I never for a moment said they had, Ludovic!" cried his mother agitatedly. "The rain falleth upon the just and the unjust, and all that, as I perfectly well know, but all I meant was that poor dear Rosamund can't be expected to look upon it as being the Will of God at all. It just seems to her a sort of fanatical idea of making oneself as miserable as possible."

"Unfortunately," said her son dryly, "the misery isn't confined to the fanatic. Other people suffer for his act, and have, as you say, no compensating belief in the reward to follow."

"That," said Lady Argent very earnestly, "is the worst part of it. I mean, knowing that one is making the people one loves suffer. If there's one thing absolutely certain, Ludovic, it is that Frances minds infinitely more for Rosamund's sake than for her own—in fact, of course, she doesn't mind at all, as far as she herself is concerned, since she's deliberately chosen it. But you know what a little tender-hearted thing she is, and how devoted they've always been—and then you talk about her making Rosamund suffer! which, of course, she's doing, poor little dear, but you may be sure it's every bit as bad for her."

"It seems to be a vicious circle," remarked Ludovic grimly.

He began to limp up and down the length of the room, slowly.

The relation between Rosamund and Frances had always been a thought that could move him profoundly, for reasons which he had never sought to analyse. Perhaps it was the memory of the two children who had been brought across the valley to see his mother by Mrs. Tregaskis. At all events he could recall at will, and always with that sensation of acute and impotent compassion, the child Rosamund who had crouched on the ground to listen outside a closed door.

He thought of her now.

"Mother," he demanded abruptly, "let me know how it stands. Has she taken any vows yet?"

"Oh no. This was only her *prise d'habit*. She gets her religious name, you know, and all her hair is cut off—not that the Prior really did cut it with those blunt old scissors under her veil—quite impossible. It must have been properly done afterwards."

"Then she could still change her mind?"

"Yes, if she wanted to. She won't take even her first vows for another year, and then they'll only be temporary ones. The Church is very prudent in these matters, Ludovic."

"I dare say," said Ludovic, with no marked conviction in his tones.

"Well, at all events, she's not bound herself down yet, and she's very young. Would there be any difficulty about her coming away if she wanted to?"

"Of course not, my dear boy. Don't suggest anything so preposterous. Anybody would think," said Lady Argent plaintively, "that you were like Sir Walter Scott or somebody dreadful of that kind, who always wrote as though the Church was a most barbarous institution, and convents and monasteries only good for extermination. Of course they would let Frances go in a minute if she wasn't happy. It's a question of vocation."

"Well," said Ludovic hopefully, "there's still a chance, then, that she may find she's mistaken her vocation."

"Yes," said Lady Argent reluctantly, "and I'm afraid that Rosamund is building on that. She keeps saying:

'It can't last—it's only a phase. Francis will come away again.' But, indeed, Ludovic, I don't think she will."

"If it's any comfort to her sister, mother, I should let her think it. Anyhow, it gives her time to become more reconciled to the idea, before the whole thing is made irrevocable."

Lady Argent shook her head, and said that dear Ludovic knew nothing about it, and what was the use of living in a fool's paradise, though of course one couldn't exactly say that poor Rosamund was in any sort of paradise just now, but she ended by following her son's advice and allowing Rosamund to dwell on the thought that sooner or later Frances would relinquish her convent life.

Ludovic, however, observant and speculative, came to the conclusion, during the few days she spent with them in London, that there was no conviction in Rosamund's assertion that sooner or later her sister would return to her.

He would have liked to talk to Rosamund, the instinct of compassion within him reminding him strangely of their first meeting in the Wye Valley days.

But she hardly appeared to be conscious of his existence, and Ludovic was too intuitive not to be aware that her every faculty was still absorbed in Frances, and Frances only.

On the evening before she left London, however, Ludovic obtained a few words with Rosamund.

He found her in the hall, looking wistfully at the letters which had just come in by the last post.

She looked up with a faint smile at the sound of his crutch upon the tiles.

"It's very foolish, but I keep thinking that I shall have a letter from Frances," she said. "And all the time I know quite well she isn't allowed to write more than once a week—and even that is only supposed to be a very special concession."

"In Heaven's name, why? What is the object of it all?"

She looked at him with a shade more colour in her face as though she was grateful for his vehemence.

"I can't really see any object in it, myself, but from their point of view it's—it's self-sacrifice, and so it becomes desirable."

"To propitiate a Being whom they call the God of Love?"

"Perhaps. I don't know. You see," said Rosamund, "it's only the personal application that matters to me. Cousin Bertha says I am very egotistical, and I think it's true. Nothing seems to matter to me *at all*, except just Frances and me, now. Nothing else seems in the least real. Once I thought something else was, but it was only a mistake. It didn't really get down to bedrock at all—not half so much as with one little-finger-ache of Frances'. I suppose everyone has something which is real in the world, besides which other things simply don't count."

"That's quite true," said Ludovic, wondering if it was a relief to her to talk. "The true secret of life has always seemed to me to lie in the focussing of that one especial thing which is the most real to each of us. So many people don't know what it is, or they may know, and wilfully blind themselves because it is contrary to a conventional ideal."

"I would much rather have thought that Morris had broken my heart and spoilt my whole life, than that he was merely an incident," murmured Rosamund, as though to herself. "That was a conventional ideal."

Ludovic was struck by the fundamental sincerity of her outlook. He looked at her tired, downcast face and said nothing.

"But now," she told him, gazing straight at him, "I know that nothing in my life has mattered at all, so far, except just Frances and the ordinary primitive facts of our being sisters, and having been children together."

"I think," said Ludovic gently, "that the ordinary primitive facts are the ones that one does come back to in the long run, always, as the things that matter most."

"Frances hasn't."

"She is very young," said Ludovic pitifully. "Don't you think she may change her mind?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" cried Rosamund. "If I didn't think

that, day and night, I should go mad. If I thought it would go on like this always—I couldn't bear it."

Ludovic knew that nothing goes on always, that the strongest, swiftest tide knows but its ebb and flow, but he would not tell her so then.

"Don't you think she will come away?" she asked him urgently, as though she could not bear the thought that his silence might imply a dissent.

"I hope with all my heart that she may, for her sake and for yours," he said gravely. "But—if you knew she was happy there, and wanted to stay?"

"I don't know what would happen then," she said. "It's as though my mind stopped, when I think of that. I just can't imagine any further."

She covered her eyes with her hand, and then turned slowly to go upstairs.

Ludovic saw that she had forgotten his presence.

He stood looking after her rather wistfully, and suddenly she turned and came back to him.

"Good-night," she said rather breathlessly. "You are the only person who has seemed to understand at all."

He was left with a strange sense of having found the child Rosamund again, and with an absolute conviction that, in spite of all her assertions as to Frances' return to the world, she yet knew them to be vain.

Nevertheless, Rosamund clung passionately to those assertions, both then and on her return to Porthlew. They seemed in some strange, inadequate way, to protect her from Bertha's regretful philosophy and resignation, and from Minnie's bland assumptions and consolations.

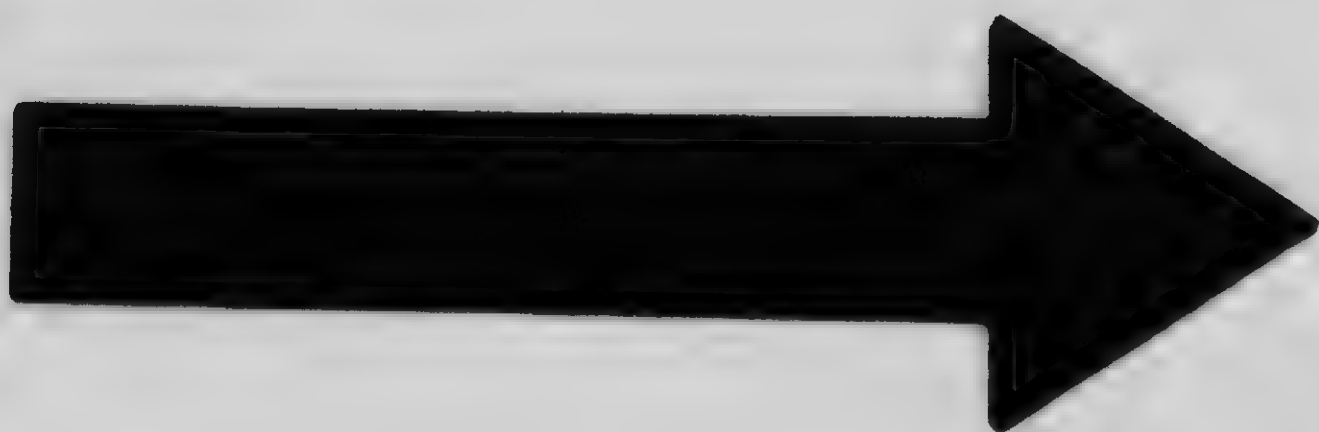
"After all, we live and learn, and it takes all sorts to make a world. That's why it's such a queer one, I suppose. At least, it's not the world, so much as the people in it."

Thus Miss Blandflower, surpassing herself. And adding, with regretful shakings of the head:

"Poor dear little Frances! But I suppose it's as it will be, you know."

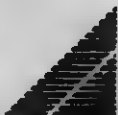
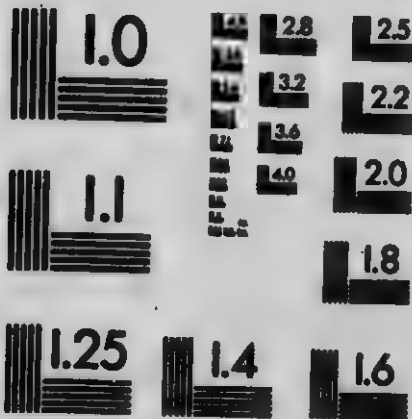
"Minnie, my dear woman, you're a fool," said Mrs. Tregaskie bluntly. "What on earth can you possibly mean by 'it's as it will be'? And if you do mean any-





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thing, of what consolation is it to this poor little *mater dolorosa* here?"

She laid her hand kindly on Rosamund's shoulder.

Miss Blandflower had lived with Mrs. Tregaskis for a number of years, had a whole-hearted adoration for her, and was not at all sensitive. Neither was this the first time that her dear Mrs. Tregaskis, with playful candour, had called her a fool. She therefore smiled with great placidity, and said deprecatingly:

"Dear Mrs. Tregaskis! I always say you're such a purist—always catching one up. I'm afraid I'm dreadfully slipshod in my way of speaking sometimes—but while there's life there's hope. You may yet cure me, in my old age."

"I doubt it very much, Minnie," said Bertha briskly, to which Miss Blandflower thoughtfully rejoined:

"I doubt it, said the carpenter, and shed a bitter tear," which saying Bertha had so long regarded as part of Minnie's stock equipment that she scarcely heard it, and addressed herself to Rosamund again.

"Well now, daughter mine, I want to hear all about the child."

Mrs. Tregaskis had sometimes employed this proprietary form of address in speaking to Rosamund since Hazel's marriage. She seldom used the words lightly, however, but as though to denote some deeper sympathy or kindness.

Rosamund looked at her unintelligently.

Her head felt stupefied from the tears she had shed, violently and uncontrollably, during the few days she had spent with Lady Argent, and she was far more physically shaken by the strength of her undisciplined emotions than she realized.

On the night of her return to Porthlew, Cousin Bertie had said very kindly: "I see how it is, my child," and had sent her to bed at once, and come up twice to see that Rosamund had all she wanted, and was really going to sleep. She had asked no questions, only saying: "You shall tell me all about it to-morrow."

And now to-morrow had come, and Rosamund, who had slept heavily and dreamlessly until after nine o'clock,

was to tell them all that had happened during her brief stay at the convent, all the details about Frances that her little circle wanted to know, give them all the loving messages that Frances had sent.

She wished dully that she could apply some kind of spur to her brain, which felt oddly and inexplicably incapable of transmitting into images any impression of the convent she had visited. Even her tongue felt curiously weighted, as though speech were an almost impossible effort.

"Come," said her guardian encouragingly, "how does the little thing like it? Her letters don't tell one very much, but perhaps that isn't altogether her fault."

"No, I don't think it is."

"Ah," said Miss Blandflower, shaking her head, "I always thought those letters of hers were not what I call *spontaneous*. Like being in prison for her, isn't it—practically?"

Rosamund whitened, and Frederick Tregaskis remarked in a detached tone:

"I suppose that by 'practically' you merely mean, like every other woman, 'theoretically.'"

"He! he! he!" giggled Minnie nervously, as she invariably did when addressed by Frederick, thereby causing him to cast upon her an infuriated glance of contempt, as he relapsed into his habitual silence.

"Do you think she's happy?" asked Bertha, looking sharply up from her knitting.

"She said she was, and that she felt in the right place."

"A place for everything and everything in its place," muttered Minnie. "Ah well!"

"H'm! She evidently knows better than the Almighty then, since the place *He* put her into was Porthlew, in my opinion. However, she's like so many of her generation—finding it easier to serve abroad than to be served at home. Poor little girl! Did she look well, Rosamund?"

"Fairly."

"Only fairly?"

"She's less thin than she used to be, but her eyes looked tired, I thought."

"That sounds like nerves," said Miss Blandflower, shaking her head with a sapient expression.

She had persisted in looking upon Frances as a victim to "nerves" ever since she had first heard of her wishing to leave Porthlew for the convent.

"Want of sleep, probably," said Frederick.

A dull pang went through Rosamund at the words, though they only confirmed her own sick apprehensions and surmises, and she said apathetically:

"Yes. They get up at five every morning, always."

"Yes, my dear, but they go to bed early, don't they?" sensibly remarked Mrs. Tregaskis.

"About half-past nine, I think. That's when they all leave the chapel."

"Oh, well, there you are. It doesn't hurt anyone to get up early if they go to bed early enough. It's the sleep that you get before midnight that counts, you know," said Mrs. Tregaskis comfortably.

"Early to bed and early to rise  
Makes little folks healthy, wealthy, and wise,"

added Miss Blandflower encouragingly. She was generally late for breakfast herself, but more from innate unpunctuality than because she failed to rise between seven and eight o'clock every morning.

"Well, Rosamund, dear, can't you tell us a little something about the ceremony? Was it pretty?"

"Yes, I think it was, Cousin Bertie."

Rosamund racked her brains. If only she did not feel this utter inability to speak!

Once or twice before in her life this same sensation, which she could only translate into physical terms by telling herself that her tongue felt as though it were weighted, had assailed her.

She thought of it as a sort of partial paralysis, and something of the blankness of her sensations was reflected in her speechless fixity of gaze. Her guardian looked at her.

"Now, look here, old lady," she suddenly said with all her characteristic authoritative kindness in her voice, "I don't want to drag this out of you bit by bit, if you

feel it's rather more than you can stand just yet. But remember that Frances is my child as well as your sister, and we all love her and want to hear about her. I don't approve of what she's done, and I don't choose to go and countenance a performance of which I dislike the idea as much as I do that wedding-dress business. But I was glad and willing that you should go, as you know, and I want news of her—so do we all. Now, Rosamund, if you're too sore to talk about any of it, just say so, and we'll try to make allowances and wait until you can overcome yourself a little for the sake of other people. But once for all—I'm not going to pump you."

Mrs. Tregaskis set her lips in a very determined way indeed, and knitted vigorously, and Miss Blandflower, seizing upon her last words, repeated vaguely: "It is the pump, the village pump."

Rosamund sought for words desperately.

She evolved at last a halting, stammered, lifeless account of the *prise d'habit*, of Mrs. Mulholland's officiousness, of the afternoon in the garden with Frances, and the interview with the novice-mistress.

"They're satisfied with her, then?"

"Oh yes. The nuns told Lady Argent that Frances was *très docile—tout à fait l'habitude de l'obéissance*."

"Aha!" laughed Bertha. "She owes something to her wicked old heathen guardian, after all, then. I venture to think that *l'habitude de l'obéissance* was picked up at Porthlew."

"Nonsense," was the contribution of Mrs. Tregaskis' husband to the conversation. "Frances was submissive by nature, and it would have cost her a great deal more to disobey than to give in."

Frederick was too much apt to speak of his wife's departed protégée in the past tense, but Rosamund shot him a look of gratitude for the understanding which his speech seemed to denote.

"She may have been submissive, Frederick," his wife said quietly, "but you don't have to look very far to see that Frances was self-righteous enough to blind her to her own self-will. Look at the way she left this house."

"She thought she was doing right," said Rosamund quickly.

"I know that perfectly well. I understand Frances, Rosamund, quite as well as you do—better, perhaps, since I'm an experienced old lady who's seen something of human nature. But that's neither here nor there. We've discussed the ethics of the case often enough. The child's taken her own way, and I want to hear something about how she's getting on."

"I think she's happy," said Rosamund rather doggedly. Bertha looked doubtful, and said with rather a curt laugh: "Well, I suppose getting one's own way makes up for a good deal."

"Undoubtedly," observed her husband. "You can see a striking example of the advantageous results of self-will in our daughter Hazel, Bertha."

Mrs. Tregaskis, who never made any reference to that side of Hazel's marriage which was oftenest in her thoughts, flushed her heavy infrequent red and remained silent.

Miss Blandflower looked frightened.

"I am afraid the day will come," she remarked courageously, "when Hazel, as well as poor dear little Frances, will wish she hadn't taken her own way and . . . and flown in the face——" Her voice trailed away feebly.

Lady Marleswood had become yearly more radiantly prosperous and happy since her marriage, but Minnie still clung faithfully to the thought of the day that would come, even while rejoicing admiringly at the occasional glimpses vouchsafed to Porthlew of Hazel and her happiness.

Bertha Tregaskis broke the silence abruptly.

"Did you give her my message about her money affairs, Rosamund, and what does she want to do?"

"She said she would have to make a will after she comes of age, when she takes her vows. It seems to be quite a usual thing for nuns to do."

"I dare say," snorted Frederick. "Supervised by the Mother Superior, I presume?"

"I suppose so," said his wife shortly. "I don't imagine they'll turn up their noses at three hundred a year."

"Perhaps she'll have left before then," said Miss Blandflower hopefully, and Rosamund, far from exalted as her opinion generally was of Minnie's prognostications, looked at her gratefully.

"Listen to my words of wisdom, dear, and you'll see I'm right," declared Minnie, encouraged by any unwonted signs of attention, so few of which ever came her way. "I undercumstumble our little Francesca—we shall see her trotting home one of these days, you mark my words."

Little though Porthlew was in the habit of marking Miss Blandflower's words, they brought a shred of comfort to Rosamund.

She was striving with passionate intensity to persuade herself that Frances would leave the convent before taking vows there, and that her desire for the religious life was only a phase.

Even when the months went on and her sister's letters gave no sign of a possible return, Rosamund told herself that in the next letter Frances would ask to be taken away. She could not face any other possibility, and felt, as she had told Ludovic, as though her very imagination stopped at, and could never take in, the prospect of a future without Frances, with Frances permanently established in a strange, new life where one would never know anything of her inner existence, and might not even be told if she were ill or unhappy.

The thought was to her unendurable.

She had no natural tendency towards religion, and very little belief in any beneficent Deity, but she took to a sort of frenzied praying, that the God whom Frances worshipped might reject her sacrifice.

The material aspects of convent-life, as Rosamund had seen them during her day at the convent, began to obsess her. She obtained books that told of the lives of nuns, the foundations of religious orders, and the rule prevailing there. The accounts of some of the physical austerities practised by the more ascetic orders turned her sick, and her nights began to be haunted by visions of Frances, starved and emaciated, bleeding under the self-imposed lash of a knotted scourge.



"I am exaggerating—I am going mad," Rosamund told herself. "Frances is well and happy—her letters say so."

*"But her letters are read before they reach me."*

She writhed at the thought.

Her very ignorance of convent-life added to the sense of horror which was gradually taking possession of her imagination.

She looked back upon the days when she and Frances and Hazel had been children together as at some incredible other life, full of a security so supreme that it had been undreamed of by any of them.

In vain Rosamund told herself, with a piteous attempt at readjusting her focus upon life, that change was only development, that alteration was bound to mark the inevitable way of progress.

"Not this way," her anguish protested wildly. "Not this way. Hazel has cut herself off to a certain extent by her own voluntary act, but at least she is happy and free—and my Francie—how do I know her to be either?"

Only two things stood out saliently in the darkness which encompassed Rosamund's soul: her resolution not to add to the cost of Frances' sacrifice by any pleadings of her own, and her anguished trembling hope that Frances might yet relinquish that way which seemed so fraught with suffering for them both.

## XXV

At Pensevern, Mrs. Severing had received one of her son's infrequent, and generally ill-timed, suggestions of a return to the parental roof.

"Will join you in London," was Nina's immediate telegraphic reply.

She did not definitely assure herself that she wished to preclude, as far as might be, the possibility of a *rapprochement* between her son and Rosamund Grantham, but situations in which Nina Severing did not play the principal rôle were ever distasteful to her, and she gracefully eluded the possibility of involving herself in such a situation by a murmured fear that Morris would find Pensevern and the depths of the country too uneventful.

Having thus skilfully guarded against events which might serve to vary the uneventful, Nina felt able to rejoice in the self-sacrifice of leaving "the beloved country and God's own peace and quiet there" in favour of the Ritz Hotel.

Morris, within twenty-four hours of her arrival there, disconcerted her by inquiring, with a piercing glance, whether Rosamund was at Porthlew.

Nina raised her eyebrows.

"Of course," she said easily. "Why should she be anywhere else? She always is at Porthlew."

"I heard she was in London with the Argents the other day."

"The other day! What nonsense you talk, Morris. Rosamund spent two or three nights with them just about Easter-time, so as to go down to poor little Frances' ceremony, whatever it was."

"What a shame it is to let a little thing like that go and shut herself up for life," said Morris warmly.

Nina immediately looked pained.

"There are one or two ways of looking at it," she said

slowly. "I don't like to hear you making sweeping assertions like that, Morris, especially when you know nothing about the matter. It doesn't matter when you only say it to me, of course, though it's neither very polite nor very dutiful, but I should dislike it very much if anyone else were to hear you laying down the law as you sometimes do."

Morris was aware that there were indeed few things that his mother disliked more than to hear him express an independent opinion on any subject whatever, and he consequently said, with a decision of manner that almost bordered upon violence:

"My dear mother, there really can't be two opinions about the question of a child of eighteen or nineteen being allowed to take vows which will bind her to a life of that sort. It's simply iniquitous."

"You talk like a child, Morris!" exclaimed his parent, pale with annoyance. "But it only makes me laugh, a little sadly, to hear you. You'll feel so very differently in a few years time."

"I doubt it," declared Morris easily. "A friend of mine—no one whom you'd know, mother dear—has gone into that sort of thing a good deal, and is thinking of being a Trappist monk. We've naturally had a good deal of discussion on the subject."

Nina gazed at her son with a freezing eye. It gave her the most acute sensation of annoyance every time that she realized afresh in him the self-opinionated arrogance which he derived from her.

"My poor boy," she said at last, "you don't really suppose, do you, that your discussion of any of the real things of life can count for anything? Why, your opinions have no more value, to those of us who *know*, than the little idle chirpings of a baby bird that thinks it knows how to fly without waiting to be taught."

The vigour of this trenchant simile carried Nina sublimely past its ornithological inexactitude, and she recovered her poise of mind.

"Little Frances will have a very beautiful, peaceful, sheltered life," she observed thoughtfully. "She has shirked all the responsibility, all the sorrow and suffering,

that others have to face. She will never grow up—life will always be a soft, childish, happy dream for her. It's a very easy way out."

Morris gazed at her with the expression which both of them felt to pertain to one who knew better.

"That remains open to question," he exclaimed with thoughtful deliberation. "To those outside, the idle, the rich, the thoughtless, it may seem a sheltered life in a garden of roses—but what about the vigils and fastings and scourgings, mother?"

"Morris," inquired his mother coldly, "what have you been reading?"

Her son left the room in a fury.

That night at dinner he refused several courses with an air of asceticism, and drank only water, feeling that in some subtle manner this abstemiousness justified his attitude of the morning. Nina, perfectly following the workings of this strange law, remained serenely unmoved.

The astonishing ease with which Nina and Morris invariably penetrated one another's poses was perhaps due less to years of practice than to the fundamental similarity of their methods and outlook.

It was no surprise to Morris Severing, although it irritated him very considerably, when two days later, Nina exclaimed over her correspondence in impassioned accents:

"Bertie Tregaskis is miserable about Frances—miserable! And no wonder. The child has written that she isn't well—has been in the infirmary or something—some kind of epidemic, I imagine, as the Superior is ill too, which seems to be all that Frances writes about. She gives no details about herself, and persists in declaring that she's perfectly happy and doesn't want to come away. It's scandalous."

"What is?" coldly inquired Morris, who had not forgotten Nina's recent reception of his views on the cloistered life.

"This convent system. I've a very good mind . . ."

Nina assumed an aspect of deep consideration and of a preoccupation which Morris did not judge sufficiently deep to prevent his gazing with ostentatious inattention out of the window.

"A very good mind," Nina repeated, and paused. Morris took advantage of the pause, which his parent obviously desired broken by a question, to light a cigarette with every appearance of deliberation and in perfect silence.

But Mrs. Severing's determinations were not easily baffled.

"Yes," she said thoughtfully, and thereby with great skill bridging over the pause, "I'm not at all sure I oughtn't to go down there myself."

Morris raised his eyebrows, an exercise ever effectual in conveying to his mother various undutiful sentiments which could not easily have been put into words.

"To Porthlew, mother?" he inquired, aware that she meant to the convent.

"Why do you say 'to Porthlew,' Morris, when you know perfectly well that I don't mean that at all? Your affectation is unbearable, and no one but your mother would put up with it. I'm forbearing and long-suffering with you, because you're my son, but who else in the world, do you suppose, would have patience with your endless petty insincerities and your insolent manners?"

This profitless inquiry, which Nina had hurled at her son some three times a week from the date of his tenth birthday, he allowed to drop unheeded.

Nina, having voiced her annoyance that Morris had not put the obvious inquiry which she had meant him to put as to her newly-taken decision, allowed a moment to elapse, and then resumed in ordinary conversational tones:

"They know me at the convent, and they'll let me see her, all right. I could tell in one moment how things were."

"I should have thought Mrs. Tregaskis would be the best person to go, or Rosamund."

"Rosamund?" Nina laughed, shrilly, as she herself recognized with inward annoyance. "Rosamund is a little girl, my dear Morris. A child is of no use. It's a matter for a woman of the world, with tact and experience. As for poor dear Bertie, with her sledge-hammer ways, I'm afraid she'd be worse than useless. But the Superior knows me—dear Mère Pauline!"

Nina, with a slight effort, recalled the name of the Superior, and uttered it with a marked effect of intimacy.

Morris laughed a little.

"You could hardly count on her remembering you, could you, considering that it's nearly two years since you went down for those few days, and were so terribly bored? I shall never forget coming down to fetch you home, and how thankful you were to get away from it all!"

"Morris," said Nina with dignity, replying to the spirit which had prompted this ingeniously perverted reminiscence, "if you can speak like that to your widowed mother, there is no more to be said to you."

Nina seldom claimed official rank, as it were, as Morris' widowed mother, until the last outpost of her endurance had been reached, and as Morris was in reality sincerely grateful to her for never having presented him with a stepfather, he changed his tactics.

"Of course, you could quite well go down from here for the day, but do you really think there's anything wrong? If she was really ill, they'd send for Mrs. Tregaskis, I suppose. Anyway, she's always been more or less delicate, hasn't she?"

"That sort of quiet, regular life ought to have made her quite strong," said Nina negligently. "I must say, though, this is the first time one's heard of her having a day's illness there. The ungrateful little thing has never written to me, either, except one rather stilted, affected letter, just after she'd been given her religious habit. Evidently she was so pleased with the novelty of it all, she couldn't help rather playing a part. Poor little thing! It didn't ring quite true, somehow, when she spoke of praying for one, and signed herself, 'Yours affectionately in Christ, Sister Frances Mary.'"

Morris laughed, with a note of indulgence that appeared to Nina's sensitive perceptions to savour somewhat too nearly of superiority.

"That sort of posing never rings quite true, if very young people would only realize it," she said, skilfully transferring her condemnation from the particular to

the general, whence it might safely be assumed to include her son.

"Frances was anything but a *poseuse*, mother."

"My dear boy, you haven't the least idea—how could you at your age—of the effect that an atmosphere of that sort can have on a silly, impressionable girl. Poor little Frances probably wrote in that exaggerated convent style simply because she thought it would impress me with her holiness," said the discerning Mrs. Severing.

Morris shook his head, and even indulged in the cheap provocation of slightly curling his lip.

"However that may be," he said tolerantly, and disregarded Nina's interpolated: "I've just told you how it is——" "However that may be, mother, if you really want to go down there, we could take the car to-morrow. It would be a really long run."

He was quite aware that his mother had never for a moment seriously entertained the project of raiding the convent and obtaining an interview with Frances.

"I don't know," said Nina austere. "I shall have to consider very carefully, Morris. It's not the sort of undertaking that can be lightly rushed into."

"Why not? The car is running beautifully just now."

Nina gave him a glance of contemptuous rebuke. She could be flippant herself, but the flippancy of Morris caused her acute vexation.

"You are too inexperienced to know how extremely cautiously one may have to move in this sort of matter," she said coldly. "People talk only too readily, and for the sake of poor little Frances, I don't want gossip about her being kept at the convent against her will."

"Considering she didn't know a soul to speak of, and wasn't even 'come out' before she went, I don't think anyone is very likely to talk about her, I must say. Beside, no one is particularly likely to know whether you go down there or not, surely?" inquired Morris in tones of simplicity.

Few things, indeed, were better calculated to annoy the composer of the "Kismet" series than an assumption that her movements were left unchronicled and unregarded by the public eye. She now laughed with all

the violent amusement so frequently simulated by intense fury.

"My dear, ridiculous boy! You've no idea how you make me laugh—if anybody could *hear* you! Do you really think that your little, stupid, childish innuendoes, which one can see through so easily, can touch *me*—an experienced woman of the world?"

Nina made this inquiry of her son so frequently that only an infinitesimal pause was ever consecrated by either of them to the reply which Morris invariably confined to a sudden sulky lowering of his whole expression. He had brought the production of this look to a fine art, and it gave an admirable representation of frank happy-hearted youth and confidence sharply transformed into sullen, hopeless misery by the recurrence of an unjust, and yet oft-repeated, attack.

Inwardly, he was always rather relieved when his parent proceeded to definite rhetoric. It justified his own sense of grievance far more effectually than the covert and undignified verbal sparring which marked their more surface intercourse.

When Nina pitched her voice some three semi-tones lower than its natural note and said, "The day will come, my poor Morris—" her son felt that she was safely embarked upon a course well known to them both, and merely retained his sombre expression by a mechanical effort of will.

The successive stages of Nina's contempt, her amused toleration, and at the same time her almost supernatural supply of patience and love for the blind and erring Morris, were reached and left behind, the youth and ignorance and folly of Morris and the store of regrets and bitter memories awaiting him in that future when Nina's understanding and forgiveness would no longer be available, were all touched upon with the sure hand of long practice, and the final peroration beginning, "Ah, if youth but knew!" was almost in sight when Nina suddenly, and, her son considered, most unjustly, interpolated into her discourse a reference which she seldom made use of, and which always disquieted Morris profoundly.



"And, mind you, Morris, you won't be able to go on like this with impunity, heartless and undutiful, and ungrateful to your mother, trading on her never giving you away to other people. The day will come when people *will* know, and *will* talk about it. That sort of thing doesn't remain hidden for ever. You know very well that I would rather die than betray you, but—later on—that sort of thing comes out, Morris."

Morris' thoughts, not for the first time, fled apprehensively to his mother's diaries.

These volumes, slowly accumulating ever since he could remember, had always held for him a subtle menace.

He knew that Mrs. Severing flew to them for solace, and had seen her more than once, with tears still gleaming on her golden lashes, bent over her desk, after interviews with her son similar to the present one.

And although Morris did not take his parent's fame as a composer at her own valuation, he had never been devoid of an uneasy conviction that she meant to present posterity with her own conception of the author of the "Kismet" series, and a lively apprehension had consequently circled for him round the thought of her diaries almost ever since he could remember.

"I don't know what you mean," he said sullenly, and wishing that he did not.

Nina looked at him pityingly.

"You must know very well, Morris, that your mother is a woman with an enormous circle of friends. One doesn't want to be blatant," said Nina, merely meaning that she did not want to be thought so, "but do you suppose that one day there isn't bound to be some sort of record made—letters or journals published——" She hesitated artistically, as though implying an unlimited posthumous publicity which might doubtless be insisted upon by the enormous circle of friends, but of which modesty forbade her to speak. Morris, always more or less hypnotized by the perfect assurance which characterized his mother's most outrageous utterances, into believing them, made a violent mental effort, and told himself that he was no longer a child.

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"I don't know what you mean, mother," he untruly assured her; "but I can tell you one thing, and that is, as far as I am concerned, letters and everything else are invariably destroyed."

"I should never count upon your loyalty to my memory, Morris," said his mother sombrely.

A heavy silence prevailed.

Morris wondered vaguely, as he had often wondered before: "What is it all about?"

There never seemed to be any definite reason for the state of strain which existed between Mrs. Severing and her son, nor for the crisis of anger and reproach to which that strain was the inevitable prelude.

Morris could not see any definite reason why amicable relations between them should ever be resumed, and yet he knew that in the space of an hour, or less, it was quite possible that the atmosphere would have changed, by degrees as rapid as imperceptible, to one of complete sympathy.

That this forecast was in no way an exaggerated one was amply demonstrated on this occasion.

After her withdrawal from the room in all the dignity of grief and forgiveness—a withdrawal fraught for Morris with hypothetical diary-writing—Nina suddenly sought her son again in the course of that afternoon with every appearance of affectionate confidence.

"Morris, I'm really worried about poor Bertie. Did I tell you that I heard from her this morning? Frederick Tregaskis is ill—a chill or something—and she doesn't like to leave him, and yet these convent people are writing to say that Frances is in the infirmary, and giving no details whatever. Simply say she's very anæmic, and it may be what the doctor calls 'pernicious.' Bertie is torn in two."

Morris, who was relieved at his parent's altered tone, felt it due to her to reply with sympathetic concern, and even added:

"Couldn't you go down to the convent yourself, and see about Frances? They'd be sure to let you in, and then you could relieve Mrs. Tregaskis' mind."

Nina looked pleased.

"I might do that. But really I don't know whether their rules and regulations would admit of a surprise visit. It's possible, too, that they mightn't quite realize who one was, as it is so long since I went there," said Nina with gracious humility, making it evident that Morris was not to be alone in his concessions.

But the next day was a Saturday, and as neither of them had ever had the faintest intention of proceeding to the convent, it was in perfect harmony that Morris and his mother motored down to Hurlingham for the afternoon.

On their return, Nina took up a small sheaf of letters in her white-gloved hand.

"Bertie again!" she exclaimed lightly. "What an insatiable letter-writer that dear woman is."

As she read the letter her face changed with that dramatic suddenness of which Morris considered only himself to be past master.

Contrary to his wont, however, he did not ignore his mother's only less admirable histrionic effort.

"What is it?" he inquired, in suitably sharpened accents of apprehension.

Nina contrived to raise a face which had paled perceptibly, an effect which Morris regretfully noted as being beyond his compass.

"Poor little Francie! Bertha writes in the greatest terror and distress. Those convent people have actually telegraphed that she is very ill indeed, and in danger. Something about the Last Sacraments. They don't say anything about wanting Bertie to go there, and in any case she's not able to leave Frederick. But Rosamund went down there yesterday."

Morris felt vaguely resentful. He disliked hearing of anyone else's grief or anxiety, and he thought his mother's agitation distinctly overdone.

"I hope she's better by this time," he said with

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Nina turned slowly away, her hand pressed to her heart, every symptom of distress emphasized in con-

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trast to Morris' obvious desire to be rid of the subject.

"This is a heavier blow to me than you can realize, my poor boy," she murmured in stricken accents. "It has been mother and daughter between Frances and me."

## XXVI

ROSAMUND, sick with anxiety, sat in the hideous little convent parlour, waiting.

Presently the door opened, and Mrs. Mulholland entered creakingly.

"Miss Grantham, isn't it? Ah yes! I remember you quite well at Sister Frances Mary's Clothing—dear me, how little we thought then—less than a year ago, wasn't it, and now—well, well! God's Holy Will be done! But the very day I learnt she was ill I said: 'Ah dear, now, to think that such a little while ago I saw her taking the habit,' I said; 'God's ways are not our ways,' I said."

"When am I going to see her?" asked Rosamund with white lips.

"Ah," said Mrs. Mulholland, shaking her head, and appearing to think that she had given an adequate reply. She sat down heavily.

"Now I want you to listen to me a moment, my dear child. You don't mind my calling you so? No—that's right. We're all little children in the sight of God, is what I always say, and I'm sure you feel like that too.

"Now I wonder if you know why I've been sent in here to you?"

Rosamund shook her head dumbly. Mrs. Mulholland's words barely penetrated to her outer senses, and her mind was tense with waiting for a summons that surely could no longer delay.

"Well, our Assistant Superior, Mother Carolina, whom you've seen already, sent for me, because she thought I might be of a little help to you. She's very busy, Mother Carolina, very much distressed and grieved at our dear Mother Pauline's illness, though it's nothing very serious, thank God—and very much harassed and overworked with all the responsibilities that have fallen on her

shoulders. But she found time to send for me, because she thought I might be of more comfort to you, not being a nun, and you being unused to convents and religious, than one of the community. Now that," said Mrs. Mulholland impressively, "is what I call great delicacy of feeling. But that's Mother Carolina all over. Nothing if not thoughtful. '*C'est la mère aux petites soeurs*,' is what I always say about her."

She looked at Rosamund's white, inattentive face.

"You don't quite understand our convent ways, do you?" she said compassionately, "and of course that's very natural. But that's why Mother Carolina thought you'd rather have me to explain things to you than one of the nuns, though she means to send the novice-mistress and the infirmarian to you presently, so that you shall have the very latest news of our dear little sufferer."

"Yes," said Rosamund gently. "It's very kind. Thank you. But I know you'll understand that I don't want to see anybody except my sister just at present. Can you take me to her?"

She rose as she spoke, but Mrs. Mulholland did not move, and her large old face became mottled and suffused with pity.

"Now, my dear child, my dear child, you must be very calm and brave and make a little sacrifice. You know it's quite against all convent regulations to let strangers into the enclosure—quite unheard of. It can't possibly be done."

"What do you mean?"

"Sister Frances Mary's in her cell, dear—just where she was when she was taken worse, they haven't been able to move her. You can't possibly see her."

Rosamund, with a pang that shook her physically from head to foot, realized subconsciously that it was for this that she had, in some strange way, been waiting.

"I can't go to my own sister, who may be dying, and who wants me? I must go." Her voice sounded utterly strange to her own ears.

"Now—now—don't take it like that, dear. It is very hard, but that's one of the sacrifices God asks of your dear little sister in return for the great grace of

her vocation, and you must help her to make it generously. I know it's hard for you, and—— Where are you going, dear !”

“To find my sister.”

Mrs. Mulholland heaved herself out of her chair, pinioned Rosamund by a kind but iron grip upon her arm, and began again very earnestly:

“Now do listen to me, my dear child, and be reasonable. You can't break in upon the enclosure, you know, because, apart from the fact that it would be a most wrong and sacrilegious thing to do, nothing could possibly distress your sister more. She's joined the Order heart and soul, you know, and it would be terrible to her to see its holy rules broken on her behalf.”

“She wants me.”

“Naturally speaking, she wants you, perhaps, but grace is stronger than nature, and she is living wholly and solely by grace now, you must remember. Indeed,” said Mrs. Mulholland, hoarsely and earnestly, “it would grieve her beyond words to have a scene in the enclosure, and with Mère Pauline ill as she is—it's not to be thought of, dear Miss Grantham.”

“But is she dying—is Frances dying !”

“That's as God wills. Perhaps He will accept this sacrifice of yours and spare her life, if He judges best, and if not—the goal of the religious life is death.”

Rosamund looked at her wildly.

“Yes, my dear child. What is the life of a religious on earth but the seeking of a closer union with God ! And how can the consummation of that union be reached but through death ! A religious lives only to die.”

“Frances ! Frances !”

“Now do cry as much as ever you like,” said Mrs. Mulholland in practical tones that contrasted oddly with the fervour that still illuminated her coarse, plain old face. “It will do you good. God knows very well that you can't help *feeling* your sacrifice, even though you make it with your will. And He won't give you more than you can bear. Now, supposing we were to ask Him together to spare your dear sister's life, if that is best for her !”

Rosamund's eyes dilated slowly.

"Can she want to live?" she half whispered.

"My dear, I am quite sure she wants only God's Holy Will, whatever that may be."

"Oh," cried Rosamund, "you don't understand. We're talking of different people, you and I. You're talking of a little prim, unnatural novice, dressed up, and doing a set of actions by routine every day, and saying her set prayers and phrases, and doing her work—and I—I'm talking of my Francie, my little sister who lived at home with me when we were in the Wye Valley, and played and laughed and was happy with me. She must want to come home—she must."

Rosamund's voice held agony, and the shadows round her mouth and under her great eyes were deepening until they seemed carved upon her colourless face.

Mrs. Mulholland gazed at her uneasily and said:

"Now do cry, my dear, it will do you a lot of good, and listen to me. I quite see that this is a most terrible trial for you, and it all seems dreadful and unnatural that your little sister should be leading this sort of life. But you know, she's chosen it all of her own free will, and I'm sure she's told you that she's very happy with us, and only longing for the day of her final vows."

"It's glamour—madness—an enthusiasm—it can't last."

"It couldn't last if it were only an enthusiasm, as you say, but you know God gives the grace to live up to a religious vocation. Your little sister has had that grace, and so she's very happy. At first it's all very difficult—the homesickness, and the obedience, and the hard life—but that's just Nature. The flesh is weak, you know, though the spirit is willing."

"I thought she would come home with me now. I thought I had come to fetch her, and that perhaps we should go home together. When I heard she was ill, I thought it was sure to mean that she would come away then, and give it all up."

"She could come away to-morrow if she wanted to. Novices are not kept against their will. No, no, dear,



your sister's vocation is a very real one. Tell me, you wish for her happiness, don't you?"

"I wish for it so much that if I'd seen her happy and at peace here I would not have said one word—not one, to make her think I wanted her back. But I haven't even seen her—I'm only told that she's very ill, and not allowed to go to her. I *will* go—it's wicked to keep me from her."

"Now, now," said Mrs. Mulholland soothingly.

The door opened softly.

"Here's Mother Juliana. This poor child is nearly frantic, Mother. She can't understand not being allowed to go to Sister Frances Mary, you see."

Mrs. Mulholland looked almost pleadingly at the tall, gentle old nun who had just entered.

"Ah," said Mother Juliana, in a strong, slow voice that came oddly from her slight, bent figure with its habitual stoop. "I have brought you a message, then, that will be of comfort to you. Your sister is awake, and I said to her that you would like a message, but I did not tell her you were here—it was wiser not. She is very weak, *is pauvre*, but she whispered, so softly: 'Tell her: My love, and I am so happy.'"

"Thank God for all His mercies," said Mrs. Mulholland with a sort of matter-of-fact promptness. "Is she better?"

"I do not think her better," said the nun quietly. "I do not think she will get better in this world. God wants her for Himself."

Rosamund looked dumbly at them both.

"She does not suffer," gently said Mother Juliana with the same faint, remote smile. "She is very quiet and peaceful—and, as she said, so happy! She has the smile of a little child, mademoiselle."

"There, there," said Mrs. Mulholland, unconscious of the tears running down her face, "what did I tell you! Come into the chapel, my dear, with me. You shall be quite quiet there, and we mustn't keep Mother Juliana. Is not the doctor due now?"

"Yes. I came down to see mademoiselle first, but I must return to my infirmary at once. I will come and

tell you what he has said, my child, but do not have false hopes. God knows what is best."

She turned and glided noiselessly out of the room. Her whole demeanour was one of ageless, passionless aloofness. She was very unlike Mère Pauline, quick, alert, human.

"Ah, I wish that Mère Pauline could have been here to see you, my poor child," cried Mrs. Mulholland, as though involuntarily struck by the contrast. "But human comfort can do very little for any of us. Now come with me, won't you?"

She took Rosamund's hand as though she had been guiding a child, and led her to the chapel door.

"Go in there," she whispered huskily, pointing to the half-open door. "I'll come and fetch you when the doctor has gone away again."

Rosamund went in and heard the door swing to behind her.

The chapel was very still and hushed in the afternoon sunlight. A tiny purple patch danced and flickered over the wall. Nothing else moved. As Rosamund's eyes became accustomed to the semi-gloom she saw that the figure of a nun knelt upon an upright carved *prie-dieu* just in front of the Sanctuary. The black veil and heavy habit hung in motionless folds. It seemed as though nothing could, or would, ever disturb that immovable contemplation again.

Rosamund knelt mechanically and remained on her knees, thoughts seething without any conscious volition of her own across the upper surface of her mind, and beneath, an abyss of misery toward which she felt herself slowly, slowly slipping. When the surface thoughts failed her, she knew subconsciously that she must touch those yawning depths. She wondered if the nun was praying. Making intercession, perhaps, for the Superior whose illness had flung the community into disarray—asking for the forgiveness of her own half imaginary sins—involuntary infringements of some convent regulation. Was she praying for those whom she loved—those who had perhance been all the world to her, before she chose to renounce all human ties and give herself to God alone?

Rosamund slipped a little further towards the abyss with the thought.

Once upon a time the woman kneeling there in her black draperies had been a little child, living at home with a father and mother, and no doubt other children—the children who had played together—shared the countless associations of a common childhood. Did the one who was a nun remember still, or had it all become unreal to her? Was the only reality her tranquil community life, with its loyalty to the Superior, to the Order, its forgetfulness of the things outside?

She had forgotten, perhaps. The children who had played together at home, the mother who had perhaps gathered them round her in the long summer evenings and called them home from their outdoor play when the afternoons grew short and dark, were all part of another life, to the nun. Now if she were dying, her mother would not be allowed to go to her.

Nearer—nearer still to that bottomless gulf.

If they came to see her, it would be "*un parloir*," for our sister—the Superior would send her down as to a duty, the time of her stay would be regulated. There is work to be done—work for the community, for the glory of God. Our sister cannot be spared for very long. But the Superior—the Superior herself will come down to the waiting mother and sister. They shall see the building—the Chapel—the Superior will arrange that tea should be brought to them in the parlour. And our sister is grateful—that the Superior, with so much to do, so much to think of, should yet spare some of her time and of her thought for the anxious visitors waiting in the grim little parlour.

*Why—ah, why?*

The edge of the precipice is very near now.

The nun has made her sacrifice—she has given it all up—the life in the world, the love in the world, the homely affections and joys in the world. They say that she has given it all to God. He wanted it then? He gave her all those things only that she might give them back to Him—and in return He gives her Himself.

They say so.

*They told Francis that.*

Francis has given everything: her innocent youth, the old happy days with Rosamund, the days when they had been little children together in the Wye Valley, the small troubles and small enjoyments that had made up her life—all merged now into one vast reality, one supreme sacrifice.

What was it the woman who had been kind had said in the parlour! Death is the goal of the religious life.

If she died it would be all over. Over for Frances, the long separation that the years would widen between her and Rosamund; over, the aching sense of home-sickness that surely the most detached of our sisters must know, the secret wail of "Never more" that is now only a temptation to be met and crushed. Over, the hard daily life—the monotonous early rising, battling with sleep in the cold of the chapel, the heavy day's work, the inevitable recreation with guard on tongue and senses, the struggle to fix a tired mind on prayer or contemplation; over, the infinite tension, the stretching towards an unattainable ideal—all over in death.

So near to the abyss now that no more clutching at thoughts and memories can save her, Rosamund prays:

"Let her die. Let it all be over for her. Oh God, if there is mercy and pity in You let Frances die now. She has made the sacrifice—she was willing to give up everything for You—let that be enough—let her die now. Don't let her come back to it all. If she dies now, it will be all over. She will be with You in Heaven perhaps, or else it will just be nothing—all over. That would be best—oh, that would be best. Never to know or feel anything any more—to be at rest.

"Let my Francis die now. I don't even ask to see her again—it would break her heart to see me like this; let her only remember me as in the old days when we were together—she and I—as we shall never, never be any more."

Never.

The sense of irrevocability has suddenly become poignant and unbearable. There is no going back. There is no solution.

And with that certainty comes the last failing clutch at the sense of proportion which lies at the back of sanity—and then the abyss.

"Poor child, poor child," sobbed Mrs. Mulholland noisily outside the door. "Shall I bring her to you. Mother dear?"

"Bring her to the little parlour."

Mrs. Mulholland creaked into the chapel, mopping at her eyes resolutely with a large handkerchief, and sank heavily on to her knees beside the bench where Rosamund was half kneeling and half crouching.

"Mother Juliana wants you in the little parlour, my dear. Will you come?"

Rosamund came. Her hands moved with a helpless, groping gesture, and her face, stained and ravaged, was blank of expression.

"My dear, God's Holy Will be done, is what I say," said the old woman beside her, moving along the stone passage with a step that seemed more ponderous than usual.

"You've been making your act of resignation too, haven't you, poor child—I know it. Come in to Mother Juliana."

Mrs. Mulholland was crying openly, but Mother Juliana faced Rosamund with the fixed, remote gaze of one whose standard of values is set elsewhere.

"God is going to ask a gift from you," she said quietly to Rosamund.

Rosamund looked at her with the dilated eyes of a child that cannot understand what is said to it.

"There is only one solution," she muttered in an inward voice.

It was the only conviction that remained to her from out of chaos, and she held to it as to the last link with sanity.

"There is only one solution. I had to pray for that."

"God holds all solutions in His own hands," said the nun. "Your beloved little sister has done her work for Him on earth, and He has taken her to Himself."

"Is Francie dead?" asked Rosamund in that same gentle inward voice.

"Our Lord called her to Heaven, in her sleep, and she went so quietly. She is with Him, dear child."

"She is dead," repeated Rosamund. "I prayed for Francie to die and she's dead—thank God—oh!"—her voice choked in her throat—"I'm thanking God that Francie is dead——"

The darkness closed round her and she touched the depths—the very depths—of the abyss.

And because those depths are deeper than we can plumb with our frail strength, a merciful unconsciousness was vouchsafed to Rosamund even as she reached them.

## XXVII

ROSAMUND lay in the tiny convent infirmary where she had been for a week.

She was quite weak, and the tears that had not come to her before streamed irrepressibly now. She could not stop crying.

They told her of the little novice, Sister Frances Mary, lying in her white habit with her hands folded against her breast, a crucifix between them, and wearing the chaplet of white artificial flowers which she had worn at her *prise d'habit*, and with which the nuns had garlanded her now over the white veil.

And Rosamund, the tears pouring down her face, saw only a little girl with soft, flying hair, in a pink sun-bonnet, swinging in the orchard above the Wye Valley.

The infirmarian told her of Mère Pauline's recovery, and of how, still weak and shaken, she had knelt, *toute tremblante, pauvre Mère*, in the chapel where they had placed her child, and prayed beside the black-draped oaken trestles where lay the mortal remains of Sister Frances Mary.

Rosamund had heard the tolling chapel bell, and Mother Juliana had read her the prayers that had been offered in the hillside cemetery beyond the town, where they had laid Sister Frances Mary. And she had seen another hill, and heard only the sound of two little sisters calling to one another in their play.

The nuns did not understand. They had only known Sister Frances Mary.

They were very kind to her, and the infirmarian daily brought her messages from the Superior, promises of an early visit, and assurances that she was not to think of leaving the convent until *le médecin* had declared her to be *remise du coup*.

Rosamund remained passive. The tears that she

could not restrain did not matter here, and they kept her from the lowest of those abysmal depths that she had sounded before something snapped within her, and she had felt herself falling helplessly, in the convent parlour, with Mrs. Mulholland's large, frightened old face wavering strangely before her eyes.

Since then, unutterable weariness and yet unutterable relief had taken possession of her. Frances was dead, and Frances was hers again as in the days when they had been children together, and seen all life before them in an illimitable perspective. Of Porthlew, she thought hardly at all. Her mind had gone back to the Wye Valley days. Old formulæ that had passed between the two, long since forgotten, little trivial memories that had been common to them both, thronged to Rosamund's mind almost involuntarily in her weakness, and the finality held by Death seemed the only refuge from the far more poignant finality that life had offered.

In the curious need of dependence which utter physical and mental lassitude induces, Rosamund, scarcely conscious of even a vague surprise, found that she had turned to Mrs. Mulholland.

The old woman toiled heavily up the narrow stairs that led to the infirmary, and spent the spring afternoons sitting by the window in the tiny room, with her work held close to her spectacles, while she talked with her odd matter-of-fact piety to Rosamund, or listened to her few replies and questions.

One day she brought her some flowers, and Rosamund sobbed and cried over them, and tried to tell Mrs. Mulholland why, and could not.

"Now, my poor dear child, don't try to talk about it. The fact is you're still very weak, and the least thing oversets you. But you must remember that your dear little sister has much better flowers to look at where she is now than any this poor old earth can offer. Eye hath not seen——" said Mrs. Mulholland, shaking her head. "I often think if this earth is so beautiful with flowers and everything, why, what must Heaven be?"

Rosamund looked at her.

"Violets all the year round, most probably," pursued



the old lady cheerfully, "though, to be sure, it's absurd to talk of all the year round in eternity—but one always thinks of it as being spring or summer in Heaven. But whatever it is, my dear, you may depend upon it that your sister is seeing all the wonderful things that have been promised to those who forsake everything for God."

"Can she be happy if she knows that I am still here?" asked Rosamund wistfully.

"Happy in the Will of God. And I am sure that time seems only a flash to her, though to us it feels so long, and then you'll be with her and can enjoy it all together. And then, you know, it will be for eternity, and there will be no more parting," said Mrs. Mulholland earnestly.

"It will be just like it used to be, and all the years in between will be forgotten," sobbed Rosamund.

"That's it, my dear. Now doesn't the thought of that meeting give you courage?"

"Perhaps. It isn't as real to me as it is to you."

"Brought up without very much religion, perhaps," acquiesced Mrs. Mulholland cheerfully. "Well, well, your dear little sister will do wonders for you. A vocation in a family is a very great grace, and certainly she had done all our Lord wanted of her on earth, and that's why He took her to Himself in Heaven."

The Heaven, beautiful, material, and yet fadeless and endless, presented thus to her brought a strange weary comfort to Rosamund's mind.

"We shall be together again, and it will be just like before she went away—only better," she repeated, like a child.

"Yes—much, much better. Nothing to end it, and then God's holy presence; you know. It will all be merged in that."

"And the people we've loved on earth?" urged Rosamund, as though she needed reassurance from her companion's robust certainties.

"Yes, yes, all of them. We may have to wait a little while for some, you know, because they've purgatory to go through—and so have we for the matter of that—but Sister Frances is safe enough, my dear. Nuns have their purgatory on earth, is what I always say. And a

little pure soul like that—why, she's waiting up there now, for you, I expect. I shall get there before you, my dear, please God, and you may be quite sure I shall give you better prayers there than I can here."

"Do you want to die, Mrs. Mulholland?"

"Only when God pleases, my dear. A year or two more or less won't make very much difference, except that it gives one more time to try and get ready. But of course I look forward to getting to Heaven—naturally I do."

"And do you think you will find the people you love there?"

"Yes, dear, yes," Mrs. Mulholland patiently reiterated.

"I often think how very strange it will be to meet Michael again—that's my husband, who died more than forty years ago, after we'd been married five years. A very bad husband he was to me—I married a non-practising Catholic, my dear, and a terrible mistake it was, too—but thank God he made a very good confession at the last, and died in a state of grace. But of course he must be very much changed, since he was just a bad man when I knew him—neither more nor less—except for that little while at the end. But with all the prayers and the Masses that have been offered, and God's good mercy, I can't help hoping that poor Michael is a blessed spirit in Heaven by this time."

She nodded her head, and Rosamund thought that her lips moved as in some intercession that had grown habitual through long use.

"I've had a lot of trouble, my dear—always have had—and but for the Faith I should be an unhappy old woman. But look at what God has done for me," cried Mrs. Mulholland triumphantly; "brought me here, to the convent, with all these good nuns, so that I shall probably end my days amongst them, and get all their prayers to shorten my time in purgatory. Nearly twenty years I've been here, my dear, and my position quite established, I assure you. I live by rule, you know, though I'm not a nun—follow the office, have my own little corner in the chapel—and then the Superior likes me to keep an eye on the lady boarders. '*La mère des*

*dames pensionnaires*' the lay-sisters call me. I look after them, you know. 'Come to me if you want anything,' is what I always tell them. 'The nuns are very busy—spare them all we can. Come to me instead,' I always say. 'If I can't help you, well and good, I'll refer you to the proper quarter,' say I, 'but come to me first.' That spares the nuns a little, and I generally find that trifling difficulties can be put right without troubling them. *That's* the advantage of my position here."

Rosamund listened passively. She liked Mrs. Mulholland to talk. Her deep, rather hoarse voice seemed to make a link between reality and that abyss into which one had fallen, where nothing was real or solid but thick tangible darkness and endless despairing pain. While Mrs. Mulholland went on talking, it was as though a faint ray of light filtered down, reminding one that above the abyss there still lay solid ground with the sky overhead.

Then, very slowly, Rosamund realized that she had left the worst depths behind her. Never again would she know the blighting, searing agony of those first moments, and never again would she be as though she had not known them.

The initiation which life holds for most of us varies as strangely in its character as does the intensity of its effect upon us.

Rosamund said to Mrs. Mulholland one day:

"I feel as though this was the first time I'd ever felt anything—as though other things in my life had been only a sort of pretence. And yet they weren't. My mother's death, when I was a little girl, and leaving home, and other things—which happened at Porthlew—I minded them all. I fell in love with somebody, and thought that must be the realest thing in the world. And it made me very unhappy—it really did."

She looked at Mrs. Mulholland, not expecting her to offer any solution, but feeling a sort of weary solace in putting her confused thoughts into words.

"But, you know, it doesn't seem at all real now. It never touched bed-rock. In a sort of way—I brought unhappiness to it—not it to me."

"It's very often so, my dear," said Mrs. Mulholland placidly. "Sometimes we need a very sharp lesson to take us out of ourselves. That's where God's wisdom is so far above ours. He sees what we need, and orders all things for the best. The loss of your dear sister will bring you nearer to God."

The words might hold a simple direct interpretation for Mrs. Mulholland that could never be Rosamund's, but their truth was destined to abide with her in an ever expanding certainty.

"You are very, very kind to me," she said wistfully; "everyone is."

"You're one of us, as Sister Frances Mary's sister. The convent tie is a very real one, you know, though people in the world like to think it's not. But you have a number of friends, my dear, outside, as well as here. I have a lot of letters for you, only Mother Juliana suggested that you might be better without them just at first. Would you like them now?"

Rosamund took the little sheaf gently.

The writers seemed strange, remote to her, but she read with a faint stirring of gratitude her guardian's long letter.

Bertha offered to come to her, would have done so instantly, but for the illness of Cousin Frederick, who, they terribly feared, was threatened with pneumonia.

"But come to me as soon as you are able to, dearest child. I feel torn in two, as you can imagine, and only wish I could be in both places at once. If poor Minnie would be of any comfort, telegraph to me and I'll send her. I can easily manage the sitting up at nights for a time; anyhow, if this is going to be the long illness the doctor fears, we shall have to get a trained nurse. Remember there's *home* waiting for you, my Rosamund, and an old woman who's been through a good deal herself one way and another, and only longs to help and comfort you. One finds out, as one goes along, that nothing matters except to lend a hand."

"I ought to go back," said Rosamund. "I am quite well now. But I don't know what my life is going to be. Porthlew doesn't seem to be right for me, somehow."

It never did—and I thought that Francis and I would go back to the Wye Valley together. The cottage is ours."

"Now don't look too far ahead," urged Mrs. Mulholland. "One step at a time, is what I always say."

"Lord, for to-morrow and its needs I do not pray,  
But help me, teach me, guide me, Lord, just for to-day."

Have you never heard that before? Dear me, dear me, I don't believe you Protestant girls are ever taught anything at all. Excuse me for saying so, my dear, but really it's true. Now before you settle anything I should like you to have a good talk with Mère Pauline."

The Superior saw Rosamund in the parlour, but the understanding which she was ready to extend as to one of her own daughters in religion, failed oddly to touch any responsive chord. It was as though the two spoke different languages.

Rosamund did not want to talk with the convent chaplain, as Mère Pauline suggested, and felt merely a faint distaste at the suggestion that "*cette épreuve*" might be meant to guide her into the way of the true Faith.

Mère Pauline did not pursue the subject, but she appeared uneasy at Rosamund's listless suggestion of returning to Porthlew.

"Je n'aime pas cette atmosphère-là," she remarked with an air of omniscience that sat oddly on her little spectacled countenance.

The direct act of God therefore appeared to Mère Pauline solely responsible for the next letter from Mrs. Tregaskis, which again altered Rosamund's plans.

Frederick Tregaskis was very ill with pneumonia.

"I don't leave him day or night," wrote Bertha, "and the house would be utterly dreary for you just now. Stay on at the convent, my dear, if you're finding peace and shelter there, and when I've battled through the worst of this we must look forward to meeting. It's a sad world, Rosamund, my dear, but there's nothing for it but to keep a stiff upper lip. I'll write when I can."

"Your ever loving old

"B. H. T."

"Poor Cousin Bertie," said Rosamund.

"*Il faut prier*," said Mère Pauline. "But you, my child. Will you stay on with us, as one of our lady boarders?"

"If there were some work that I might do—it is so difficult to do nothing."

"Yes. I will reflect. A good Catholic family life is the atmosphere that I should wish for you at present, poor little one. But I will reflect."

That Mère Pauline's reflections were apt to take a practical turn was demonstrated three days later by a letter from Lady Argent begging Rosamund to come to her.

She wrote that she was alone.

So Rosamund went back to the Wye Valley.

"God bless you, my dear child," said Mrs. Mulholland heartily. "Come back and see us again, and don't forget that there's God's good purpose behind everything, whether we can see it or not."

"Will there be some sort of definite solution to it all, in time?" Rosamund asked.

She had come to have a curious reliance on Mrs. Mulholland's opinionative statements.

"To be sure, my dear. You haven't been through all this for nothing, you know," said Mrs. Mulholland, shaking her head wisely. "Now I'm going into the garden to say my office, and you know that I shall always give you and dear little Sister Frances a special intention. I've put you in together."

She kissed Rosamund warmly, then kilted her skirts in her accustomed fashion and took her old black manuals out into the spring sunshine and began her slow, steady pounding walk round and round the small enclosure.

The years would see little change for Mrs. Mulholland, until that last one which she contemplated with such matter-of-fact anticipation.

Something in that certainty sent Rosamund away with a strange lessening of the tension at her heart.

She went back to the Wye Valley, and after a little while she went across to the cottage.

Afterwards, Rosamund thought that it was on that

day that she received the first hint of the solution that she had been seeking. But at the time she was conscious only of a blurred, aching pain, that yet held the strange solemnity of final peace.

The spring rain was driving against the window-panes and the outlines of the hills were dimmed.

Rosamund wept wildly and uncontrollably, but after that afternoon she bade farewell to the stormy tears of her girlhood, and they came to her no more.

There is a certain sort of weeping that, when it has once been wrung from a woman's eyes, precludes the easy relief of trivial tears for almost all the rest of her life.

Rosamund went over the small house and found it strangely unchanged. Through it all, the sense of coming home was strong upon her.

"I could come back and live there very soon, couldn't I?" she asked that same evening of Lady Argent. "You know I always meant to."

"Yes, indeed, and one knows that if that poor dear little angel had been spared to us, you could have gone there together, except, of course, that it was perfectly obvious from the very beginning that she had a true religious vocation, and couldn't have been anywhere but where she was. But girls can do almost anything nowadays, and I've no doubt that you could find some very suitable person to live with you, since you're of age, and have your own money; and then you know, my dear, you're sure to marry. But I quite see that what you want now is just the quiet of it all, and then being fond of the place and everything. Only if you won't mind my asking, and, indeed, dear, you know it's not from curiosity, are you quite sure that you don't want to go back to Porthlew?"

"Yes. I know how good Cousin Bertie's been, but indeed I don't see any object in our living together. I worried her dreadfully when I was there, and it was quite decided that when I came of age some other arrangement would be made. You know, she has such hundreds of interests—all her work and her charities and everything—and Miss Blandflower gives her all the help she ever wants. I don't think I was much use there, ever."

There was a silence.

"I know it sounds as though I were ungrateful," said Rosamund desperately, "but I'm trying so hard to get at the truth of things. I don't feel a bit that my place is at Porthlew—I don't know where it is. I want to come home—but I don't feel even that to be a solution."

"Poor child! If only you and dear Bertie——" said Lady Argent helplessly. "But I know what that sort of thing is—so hopeless, I always think, when two people are both willing and ready and tolerant as can be, and yet they don't seem able to understand one another. And, of course, as you say, Bertie always has her hands full, and I know that very capable people don't much like being helped—I shall never forget poor Fergus—my husband, you know, dear—over his telescope and things, even when one only wanted to clean the lenses or some tiny little thing like that. But that was only one thing, and he was quite ready to ask for help about anything else. At least, almost anything else."

Lady Argent's expression became rather pensively reminiscent.

Rosamund remained vaguely wondering.

She felt during those days in the Wye Valley as though she were seeking for a conviction, latent in her mind, but that yet delayed formation and continued to evade consciousness. Once grasped, she would be in touch with reality and in some strange way closer to Frances.

She questioned herself helplessly.

"Am I sincere? Is my place really back at Porthlew, with Cousin Bertie? Is it perhaps an easy evasion to say that I am of no use to her? She gave us a home when mother died, and she has lost Hazel. Frances left her—there is only me now. Self-sacrifice—is that the key? But it all seems useless—pointless."

She remained, seeking the solution.

Even when the hand of circumstance flung her against it, it still failed to awaken her inner certainties.

Frederick Tregaskis died of pneumonia within a fortnight.

Rosamund made her preparations for a hurried de-



pasture, and found time to return once more to the cottage on the hill.

"Is it good-bye again?" she asked dumbly of her surroundings. "Certainly there is no doubt now that I have to go to Porthlew again. The solution has come, I suppose."

She felt oddly disconcerted and at variance with herself.

At all events, there was more sense of blankness than of acute bitterness in her farewell to the cottage. The renunciation, if renunciation there was, remained strangely devoid of pain.

She reflected dimly that all that for which the cottage in the Wye Valley stood was hers still, and would remain hers, and in the days at Porthlew which followed, when Bertha frankly outfaced bitterness and loss with a courage that did not shrink from reference to their divided sorrows, Rosamund told herself passionately that to her, and her alone, belonged the deepest memory of Frances.

Since her solution was to come from within, and not from without, it was almost with the sense of puzzled acceptance that is brought to an anticipated situation, that she heard Bertha's decision to leave Porthlew.

"The house is too big for me, alone with poor old Minnie, and for the matter of that I simply can't afford it now. My dear old man's pension went with him, and has made a big hole in the exchequer. Besides, I don't know that I could altogether stand it. No, no, some rich American shall buy Porthlew. Hazel doesn't want it now, and there's no one to make a home for. One must just strike fresh roots somewhere, that's all, and hope for work. It's the only thing, Rosamund, my dear, for an old woman left by herself. Find a lame dog that wants helping over stiles."

But both Rosamund and Bertha were sufficiently awake to the obvious course for it to come to life between them without even any very definite suggestion or discussion.

"Could I leave Cornwall?" said Bertha wistfully. "I be a Cornish woman thro' and thro', ma dear."

## THE PELICANS

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It was Rosamund's need of Bertha that clinched it, Rosamund, strangely, felt it to exist, and the sincerity of her urgency broke down Bertha's indifferent defences. The deepest craving that Mrs. Tregaskis knew was that of being needed, and for that she left Cornwall and went with Rosamund to the Wye Valley.

It was there, with her halved memories and strangely shared sanctities, that Rosamund's quest suddenly and consciously came to an end.

In the last and most subtle renunciation, she found the solution to which that final relinquishment held the only key, and at the same time the one enduring link that was to bring her nearest to Frances.

## XXVIII

"So you came here, my dear—after all?"

"After all, Nina. That just expresses the whole thing. Poor little Rosamund had to go through the mill, and learn her own lesson, and then after it was all over—well, she just wanted me—and there it was!"

"You were there when she wanted you."

Bertha laughed a little.

"Well—one is, somehow. The generation that gives and the generation that takes. I suppose one *took* once upon a time, oneself, and this keeps the balance true."

"And your Minnie followed you, so you're not alone?"

"Oh no! Dear Minnie! She's played ivy to my oak-tree for so long that it's impossible to imagine her without a prop. I'm glad to have her, and then Rosamund need never feel in any least little way bound—I'm renting this tiny place from her, you know. It's quite a business arrangement."

"So much the best way to do things, though, as you know, dearest, I'm so dreadfully silly about practical things like rent and ground taxes and technical terms like that. So you can really feel it's your own little domain?"

"For the time being. Anything else would have been rather an anomaly, don't you think? Rosamund has a great attachment to the place—always wanted to come back here—and then it's full of associations of her childhood and little Francie's. I know exactly what she feels about it."

Bertha's softened expression of full understanding gave weight to the words.

"So Rosamund's found herself," said Mrs. Severing musingly.

"Yes, poor dear, through coming into contact with reality. Oh, Nina, one would give anything to teach

them some other way—with less pain and fewer tears. But they won't listen. *Ah ! si jeunesse savait !*"

"Dear Bertie ! I understand—and don't think that I should ever think you egotistical for adding '*si vieillesse pouvait !*'" softly said Mrs. Severing, freely sacrificing her reluctance to display an indifferent French accent to the satisfaction of laying a delicate emphasis on the pronoun relating to her friend.

"You've felt it all, just as I have, Nina, that's why I can speak to you so freely," returned Bertha smiling.

"Darling Bertie ! I wish I could give you longer, but you know how tiresome people are, and Gwen Cotton is so dreadfully exacting. Wretched if I don't stay there whenever I'm anywhere near the place, and never allowing me out of her sight when I get there. It really is absurd—a perfect infatuation—nobody can think why. It always makes me laugh."

"How dear of you not to mind ! That sort of thing, making one look so absolutely ridiculous, always makes me angry," said Bertha serenely. "Is Morris there too ?"

"He joins me to-morrow. I want him to come over and see you."

"Yes," said Mrs. Tregaskis meditatively. "Yes."

So Morris came, and in his blue, direct gaze Rosamund read a sympathy that he was later on to express in words.

Together in the garden, on an afternoon that reminded them both oddly of another afternoon spent together in the garden at Porthlew, they stood and looked over the valley.

"May I say something ?" asked Morris suddenly and gently.

"Yes."

"In spite of everything, you are happier here than at Porthlew, aren't you ? I mean—it's your right place, so to speak—this valley, and your own home and everything."

"Yes."

"And you and Mrs. Tregaskis understand one another now ?"

"Yes," said Rosamund simply and seriously. "Cousin Bertie is an extraordinarily brave person, isn't she ?"

"I think she is. And she's a wonderfully understanding one, too. I'm glad, Rosamund. I couldn't bear to think of you in an uncongenial atmosphere now."

Rosamund, to whom it sometimes seemed that the understanding of Mrs. Tregaskis was hardest of all to bear, said nothing. The reticencies, the very reserves, which denoted Bertha's penetration into the deepest joys and sorrows that Rosamund knew, lashed at her sensitiveness as no lesser sympathy or more shallow insight could ever have done.

Ludovic Argent, again an onlooker, slowly guessed at a little of it. He wondered whether Morris Severing, in love with Rosamund, would understand. He felt a curious certainty that on that understanding would depend her answer to the inevitable question.

But Rosamund's answer, when Morris asked her to marry him, was in no way cryptic.

"I can't, Morris. It's out of the question. And, anyway, I shouldn't be any good to you."

"Dearest, you would be everything in the world. Tell me why . . ."

"For one thing, I don't love you. No, Morris—I don't. If I did—there wouldn't be anything more to be said——"

"Indeed there would," interjected her suitor with a sort of boyish blitheness, "and I'd jolly well hear you say it, too."

"It's no good my playing at things any more," said Rosamund, frowning a little as she sought for her words.

"I don't mean because I feel superior or anything ridiculous of that sort—but simply because it doesn't amuse me any longer."

"I don't want it to amuse you."

"Well, I can't do it with any conviction, if you like that better."

"I don't care if you do it with conviction or not, sweetheart—I'll convince you afterwards," said Morris, his eyes smiling at her after their endearing wont.

"No you couldn't, Morris. Not the real part of me—the only part that matters to either of us, in the least."

Morris asked her to marry him again and again, and Rosamund marvelled at her own indifference, was thrilled and shaken by his pleading, and yet refused him with a weary certainty of being true to a standard which, once seen, she must hold to.

The last time that she said she could not marry him finally brought conviction to Morris.

"Oh, do leave me," she cried. "I'm so tired, and it's all no use. There's more than one sort of love in the world, Morris, and your sort and my sort aren't meant for one another."

"I could show you that they are, if——"

"Well," said Rosamund with a sort of weary candour, "I don't want you to. I'm too tired, mentally, for any more violent emotions, Morris. Honestly, I don't believe the capacity is in me any more."

"If you fell in love, Rosamund."

"Oh, Morris!" said Rosamund, half impatiently and half in fatigue, "there are more ways of loving than falling in love."

Morris turned away despairingly and left her, carrying with him the unescapable conviction that Rosamund had no need of him.

Definitely unattainable, she became to him more desirable than ever before, and it was of hardly any consolation to him that Nina, in the deepest confidence, hinted at the tragedy obscuring his life, both to her hostess and to as many of her hostess' friends as appeared sympathetic.

"My poor boy!" she said softly, and Morris divined that despair had imparted a ravaged appearance to his handsome young face.

"I have only cared for one woman in my life," he told himself, not without some naïve feeling of surprise at the discovery. "First and last, it's been Rosamund. *On revient toujours à son premier amour.*"

The aphorism was so pathetic that he repeated it next day to Nina, who was evidently disposed for the rôle of adoring mother, sympathizing blindly with her boy's wrongs.

"I can't forgive that girl!" she cried, with all the

feminine unreason of fiction, and a blaze in her great eyes that was distinctly creditable in view of the fact that she so seldom called it into play.

"No," said Morris magnanimously, "I'm not worthy of her, mother. It's all right—only I can't let you blame her."

"How can I help it, darling?" tenderly asked Nina. "My heart is breaking for you."

Morris, who was inclined to suppose that a monopoly of broken hearts was his, at least for the time being, could do no less than turn away with a stifled groan, indicating a heartbreak beside which Nina's could not hope to rank.

It might have been Mrs. Severing's perception of this which caused her to remark with some decision:

"You will never, never know, Morris, till you have children of your own, what it is to see them suffer. It is all so infinitely more bitter than any grief of one's own—but the young don't know—they don't know."

She broke off with one of those smiles which are sadder than tears—an impression which Mrs. Severing could at all times convey with great accuracy.

"My youth is over," said Morris with profound bitterness. Rather to his surprise, Nina repressed the obvious retort, and contented herself with a faint sigh, expressing many things.

Morris felt encouraged to a further display of feeling.

"I must get out of this place, mother," he declared with an abandon of recklessness that almost turned the luxurious Towers into a medieval dungeon with every drawbridge up and guarded.

"Yes, my darling."

"I—I can't quite stand being so near her," groaned Morris.

"We'll go home again to-morrow," soothingly declared Nina, who was tired of Lady Cotton's unappreciative adulation and also hated being asked to "give a little music" every evening after dinner.

"Mother! how you understand!" cried Morris in a sudden rush of gratitude.

Nina looked at her son with liquid eyes.

He let her take his hand for a moment, gave hers a squeeze that drove the stones of her rings into her fingers, and dashed out of the room.

Nina unavoidably devoted an intense second or two to the absorbing pain in her fingers, but did so, as it were, in parenthesis. At the earliest possible moment she had recovered herself, and was murmuring softly: "My little son!" She saw Morris as a baby boy again, and at the same time clearly visualized her present self indulging in this tender illusion.

"Such a *little* boy," murmured Nina again, her uninjured hand hovering with a touching, instinctive sort of gesture about two feet from the ground.

The same rapt look of retrospective tenderness tinged and irradiated Mrs. Severing's rather elusive and sketchy explanations to her hostess and carried her serenely past the loud and affectionate reproaches that assailed her up to the very moment of farewell.

"I hate to leave you," she sighed, "but you must come and see my Cornish home one day—*soon*."

She stepped into the little car, swathed in the most becoming of amber coloured veils, and remarked to Morris almost as they left the hall-door:

"Not that anything would ever induce me to have either of them inside my house."

Her matter-of-fact tone caused Morris to break into an irrepressible laugh, and after an instant she joined him. For a moment they enjoyed a delightful sense of companionship. But Morris speedily resumed his dejection, and even added to it a dash of recklessness that caused him to sit back as far as possible in the driving-seat and disregard the speed limit and his mother's protests alike.

"Morris," said Mrs. Severing bitterly, when the car had apparently spun round a sharp corner on one wheel, "do you ever think of anyone's wishes but your own? I do all I can to please you—out short a visit which I am enjoying, at the risk of hurting a great friend, come home with you simply because you wish it—and you can't even do such a small thing as drive a little bit carefully when I beg you to."



"What does it matter?" muttered Morris, in the tone of a desperado outfacing death.

"Only that it's very bad form to be a road-hog," suavely said Nina.

The shot told, for Morris was exceedingly proud of his driving, but discretion was never Mrs. Severing's strongest weapon, and she added rashly:

"How little you know what it is to be highly strung, my poor Morris! My nerves have been a misery to me all my life long, and even if I've never said very much about it, that doesn't mean I don't suffer. No one can look at me," said Nina with emotion, "and think me a strong woman."

"Lady Cotton and Mrs. Tregaskis both told me they'd never seen you looking better," said Morris viciously.

Nina's slight laugh was compounded of annoyance and of a rather satirical compassion for the blindness of the authorities quoted.

"Dear Gwen! She always loves to say that I look better after staying with her. As for Bertie, she's such a tower of strength herself, that I rather fancy nothing short of a broken leg would ever attract her attention. I've heard other people say the same thing about her too, dear, kind thing though she is."

But Morris was annoyed.

"Well, I quite agree with them both," he remarked disagreeably. "I've never seen you look better, mother—the picture of health."

His mother smiled the pitying smile of one better informed, and Morris, subconsciously aware of it, gazed straight ahead of him with absorbed determination.

"I'm afraid what I call my best would be a very poor state of health for most people," murmured Nina, and added hurriedly: "Don't talk to me any more, Morris, I want to close my eyes. I had a very nearly sleepless night."

Morris was not minded to concede to his parent the feminine privilege of the last word.

"I'm sure you must be much stronger than you suppose, mother, if you can sleep when you're nervous."

On this encouraging reflection he drove the car with

great and unnecessary rapidity to the junction where the chauffeur met him and took charge of it, while Morris and his mother proceeded to Cornwall by train.

The journey was made by Morris in a smoking carriage, with the considerate remark: "Do finish your dose in peace, mother. I want to smoke, and besides, I wouldn't disturb you for the world."

It may reasonably be conjectured that the annoyed Mrs. Severing did not follow this filial advice.

The ensuing days at Pensevern were pleasant neither to Nina nor to her son.

Morris played the piano stormily, and Nina, wincing perceptibly, said:

"Don't, Morris. It jars horribly to hear that banging. Your touch is not at all improved."

"The 'light trills and runs' of the eighties are altogether out of keeping with modern music, mother."

"Dear me, is that what you call modern music, my poor boy? I should simply call it strumming. But I suppose," said Nina with an annoying laugh, "that you like to call it *improvisation*."

"Like!" said her son with gloomy scorn, unable to think of a better retort. "I don't suppose I shall ever like anything again."

He flung out of the room.

Most of his days might be said to be spent in this exercise, resorted to at ever shortening intervals, until finally the time came when he prefaced it by a definite statement:

"Mother, this is no good. I must go away."

"Very well, Morris. You know I'm used to being alone."

"Of course I know it is lonely for you in a way, especially since Mrs. Tregaskis has left Porthlew——"

"Very lonely," repeated Nina with a patient smile.

"But I shall make some music, Morris, and read a good deal in the long evenings, and then there's the garden . . ."

Nina's acquaintance with the garden hardly extended beyond the kaleidoscope of herbaceous border outside the drawing-room windows, but she liked the idea of silently communing with Nature.

"I shall go to America with that concert-party," announced Morris, referring to certain projects of a professional friend.

Nina, without the slightest warning, dissolved into tears.

She cried so much less becomingly than usual that Morris was moved to quick, sudden compunction.

He came and knelt beside her.

"Darling, don't cry. I won't go if you hate it. But what am I to do here? There's no work fit for a man."

Nina continued to weep.

Morris gazed at her with miserable perplexity. Accustomed though he was to Nina's easy tears, they invariably caused him acute discomfort, and, moreover, he was conscious of a certain feeling of remorse.

"Mother, don't cry. I'll stay if you want me, of course."

"No—no—it isn't that exactly."

He watched her with growing anxiety, and felt that he would do anything to stop her tears. In the tension of the moment, he sought to relieve his own intense discomfort, and at all costs to stop his mother's weeping, by an impulsive suggestion.

"Come too! Why on earth shouldn't you? *The* Nina Severing would be an enormous asset—you know they love your stuff over there."

He saw with thankfulness that her tears had stopped, and hurried on eagerly:

"Carrol wants someone to chaperone the two girls—those two who are going to do the violin duets, you know—and of course your name would be an immense draw."

"Oh, Morris! It's nonsense. How could I leave this place to look after itself?"

Morris became aware that his project was being met with a tacit acceptance. Material objections had never yet stayed any progress of Nina's.

"Easily!" he declared lightly. "You'd simply love it—and we needn't be tied to Carrol's show after the three months are up. We'd come home on our own, or stay out there for a bit."

"I should be glad to leave England behind me," said

Nina recklessly, and for no reason save the sensation of weariness induced by tears. "And so would you."

"Yes," Morris declared vehemently. "Thankful. Look here, I'm going to telegraph to Carol and you'll see what an enthusiastic answer he'll send."

"*La vie de Bohème* once more!" murmured the mistress of Pensevern, with more appreciation of the sentence than its truth warranted. No life of Bohemia had ever been, or ever would be, Nina Severing's, but her son knew by the phrase that he need fear no further display of emotion.

"Am I mad?" he demanded of himself outside the door with some amazement, then characteristically shrugged his shoulders and dismissed the thought.

He hated Nina's weeping, and had chosen the first means of consoling her which had occurred to him.

It was not Morris's way to envisage the consequence of his own impulses until actually confronted by them, and in the urgencies of departure both he and Nina found a salving for many things.

If, in the months that ensued, neither Morris nor Nina Severing found that a momentary common impulse was to prove an enduring link between them, the knowledge weighed lightly on Morris, to whom no enduring link that humanity can forge would ever equal the glamour of a new enthusiasm.

To Nina, the fundamental resemblance between them would hold out eternal lures, and promises of a new understanding. That these should fail as often as they should renew themselves, would never succeed in permanently disturbing Mrs. Severing's treasured conception of her own motherhood.

# XXIX

LUDOVIC ARGENT sometimes thought that the understanding of Mrs. Tregaskis seemed hardest of all to Rosamund. Had she anything at all left of her very own?

He found himself wondering.

He went across the valley on many days, and Mrs. Tregaskis always welcomed him with eager cordiality. It was only after a time that Ludovic admitted to himself that he sought another welcome than hers with an insistence which surprised him vaguely. One day in the autumn his halting step came slowly up the narrow garden path where Bertina Tregaskis, in the short, dark tweed of determinedly unconventional widowhood, was crouching over a border. She raised herself briskly enough at the sound of his stick upon the gravel.

"Splendid!" she cried exuberantly, showing a pair of earthy palms. "I can't shake hands—too grubby. But you'll help me tie up these poor dear things, won't you?"

Ludovic adjusted his crutch-like stick, and fumbled obediently with long pieces of bass and the top-heavy overgrown dahlias.

"Rosamund is not good at this sort of job, although she offers to help me most regularly, poor dear! But it's not in her line at all."

"Why don't you have in old Jones or someone two or three times a week?" said Ludovic with the more earnestness that his own wrestlings with the bass were strangely unsuccessful.

"We do have him every now and then, but I love pottering about, and so does Minnie. We've practically made the whole of this border—the place was in a dreadful state when we came."

Ludovic looked round the small garden.

"It has altered a good deal," he conceded. His voice was expressionless.

Bertha looked up sharply.

"There have been no changes to hurt her," she said quickly. "One understood—good heavens, yes! There are the two tiny plots over there under those lilac bushes, that belonged to them—Rosamund and Frances—when they were little children. Somehow I knew that by instinct—and why she always said wallflowers were her favourite flowers. This place is one mass of them in the spring. She's not sentimental, you know, but little things like that are sacred to one—afterwards. And Rosamund knows that I understand."

"Yes."

"It's curious," Mrs. Tregaskis continued meditatively, "how quickly one 'senses' things, when it's a question of a beloved child. I don't think, though I *do* say it myself, that any suggestion or change of mine has jarred on Rosamund. You see, I can share in some of the associations. I fetched them away from here as little children—and I was here with them when their mother died—and now the place, in a sense, is mine as well as hers. You see it's been a harbour of refuge for me, too, hasn't it?"

"You don't regret Cornwall?"

Bertha straightened herself slowly, and faced him.

"No," she replied, deliberately, but very decisively.

"The love of a place is a great thing—and I'm Cornish through and through, as you know—but, after all, other things matter more. Little Rosamund, for instance. Oh, it's not only that she wanted me—wanted me to mother and shield and comfort her, as only a child that's bought its own wilful experience *can* want one, but there's the need of giving in her, too. You know that. I rather fancy that you, too, understand Rosamund."

She looked at him rather enigmatically for a moment, but Ludovic was silent.

"Your mother told me once that she rather wondered if the whole thing would end in Rosamund's becoming a Roman Catholic, too. She made friends with a woman at Francie's convent. . . . But it won't. Rosamund

hasn't the religious temperament, for one thing. All she needed was to find herself. A modern phrase, isn't it—and one that I rather avoid, as a rule, but it's expressive enough. The child had to learn proportion—and it was taught her through the strongest thing she knew—her love for Frances. Reality is the only medium for reality, after all. Her other emotions and phases weren't real, you know—not even a sort of love affair that she had one year. But she had to get right down to bed-rock to teach her what relative values are."

Ludovic felt with an absolute conviction that Mrs. Tregaskis, as she had said, understood indeed.

He wondered deeply concerning Rosamund's acceptance of such comprehension.

That the acceptance was almost matter of fact in its completeness was evident, but it was only after a time that he became aware of a deeper serenity underlying her tranquil receptivities. It was not the pale serenity of resignation, either, for he was conscious of a certain strength and hopefulness in her outlook that differed oddly from the atmosphere of unrest diffused by Rosamund Grantham as he had known her a few years earlier.

"I'm getting much happier," she once said to him with laughing candour. "Not for any reason, you know, but just because I am."

"I thought you would. I'm very glad."

"There's no reason for it," repeated Rosamund thoughtfully. "I'm horrid enough to Cousin Bertie very often, as you knew."

He had seen her lose her temper in a quick, childish outburst over a small matter that afternoon.

"And I always thought I *must* have definite work or go mad. You know I tried writing, and everything, and none of it seemed right. Yet here I am, doing nothing at all, except little tiny jobs that Cousin Bertie mostly makes for me, and sometimes wondering if I'm justifying my existence at all—yet the days go by very quickly."

"Work will come," said Ludovic, voicing a conviction. "The jobs one takes up just to save one's fancied self-respect never seem to me to be worth while."

Rosamund laughed a little.

"I never can remember that you're in Parliament—but I always think of you in connection with your writing," she remarked frankly.

"Exactly," returned Ludovic dryly.

They both laughed, with the sense of companionship that a shared laugh almost inevitably carries with it.

"Aha!" said Mrs. Tregaskis, at work in the garden with Miss Blandflower, as the sounds came through the open window. "What do you think of me as a scheming old woman, Minnie? I can always enjoy a little match-making, even in my dotage."

"Oh, Mrs. Tregaskis, how can you talk so ridiculously?" protested Minnie. "Why, you're the youngest woman I know. They always say a woman is only as old as she looks."

"Minnie, Minnie, don't flatter! You know that spades are always spades with me. But I don't mind telling you a little secret. I think we shall see Rosamund happy yet."

"Oh! Do you mean . . . ! But I used to think—only, of course, one can never tell—"

"You mean Morris. She won't have him, my dear. He's not the sort of man for her—he's too young, for one thing. No, no—Ludovic Argent and the Wye Valley, for Rosamund, is what I think. I don't mind telling you that I've thought so all along, Minnie. I like Morris—he and I are huge chums, as you know—but ever since that boy and girl affair at home, ages ago, I've always said they weren't suited to one another."

"Well, we shall see what we shall see, I suppose," was the timorous reply of Miss Blandflower, which she hazarded as though voicing the most startling of suggestions.

"It would please Sybil very much, I fancy. Of course I know perfectly well that she wanted it to be Francie—but I suppose Rosamund is next best, even though she isn't an R.C."

"But then neither is he."

"Exactly. But poor dear Sybil has the subject on the brain, and always fancies that her prayers will 'convert' him, as she calls it, one of these days. I never saw any woman so utterly gone to pieces as Sybil—



sometimes I almost think she's in her second childhood to hear her babble as she does—there's no other word for it—simply babble."

"Babble, babble, little brook," idiotically murmured Minnie, with a pair of garden scissors between her teeth, and both hands full of tangled string.

"Here, I'll hold that for you. No, no, not the string—the scissors. Give them to me, Minnie, you'll break your teeth if you do that. Very well—but you're only getting it into a muddle. What was I saying?—oh, about Sybil. Poor dear! One of the reasons that made me come here was the thought of having her for a neighbour. We were the greatest of friends, as girls, though there's nearly ten years between us. There might be twenty, now. Minnie, whatever happens, I do pray and trust that I shall never die at the top first, as they say. If you see any tendency to garrulous old age, you must tell me so in good time. It's much the truest kindness in the long run. One would so much rather spend one's last few years silently."

"A few more years shall roll," was the thoughtful response of Miss Blandflower, as she gave a final pull to the string and scissors entanglement which succeeded in blending them all inextricably together for the rest of the afternoon.

Bertie, in spite of her strictures on the wanderings of Lady Argent's mind, was not deterred from frequently crossing the valley in search of her. She always told Rosamund vigorously that she liked the walk.

"So kind of you, Bertie dear," her hostess murmured gratefully, "because you know how much I love seeing you, and the pony is so very old one can't take him out often—especially with the bridge at the very furthest end of the village, as it is—so exceedingly inconvenient. It used to make poor dear Fergus so angry, but, of course, one knows perfectly well that this is only one house, whereas a whole village is a whole village—and was here first, besides."

"You ought to have a ferry."

"My dear, I never go down to the edge of the river without thinking of St. Christopher—you know what I

mean. It wasn't a ferry, of course, but it was all the same thing in the end—only of course so much better than a regular ferry. Not that I mean it would do nowadays, or for everybody—— My dear, what are you laughing at? Have I said something dreadfully profane? I am so terribly apt to, quite without meaning it, and Ludovic always laughs at me."

Mrs. Tregaskis laughed too, with kindly superiority.

"I don't think you're in any imminent danger of serious profanity, Sybil, and I'm sure Ludovic doesn't. Great cheek of me to call him Ludovic, isn't it? and I certainly shouldn't dare do it to his face—but I always think of you both as sort of relations, you know."

The observation was more in the nature of a small feeler than an accurate statement of fact, and Bertha watched for its effect narrowly.

"So nice of you, dear," said Lady Argent absently, without a trace of meaning in her voice or manner; "and you know I never had any sisters or brothers, so Ludovic has never had an aunt. At least, dear Fergus had one sister, but she was older than he was, a good deal, and so very Scotch. Not that I mean for a moment that her being Scotch would prevent her from being an aunt as well—in fact, I believe the Scotch think more about relationships than we do. Blood is thicker than water and all that, you know, dear, and kith and kin, whatever that may mean, which I always think sounds so very Scotch—but she really wasn't at all like an aunt to Ludovic. Just called him 'my brother's child,' you know, and sent him a little book from time to time. Very Calvinistic," said Lady Argent, shaking her head, "and I always burnt them, even in those days, though he was far too young to read, poor darling. In fact she died before he was five years old."

"Well, I'm only too delighted to do aunt by proxy," said Bertha good-humouredly. "I've been 'auntie' to a good many young people in my time, though the rising generation generally prefers 'Cousin Bertie.' I remember ages ago asking those two poor mites, Rosamund and Francie, what they'd like to call me. D'you remember my bringing them over here to say good-bye to you, Sybil?"

"Yes, indeed, so good and pathetic, poor little dears," said Lady Argent tenderly; "and both so pretty, weren't they?"

"Rosamund has rather lost her looks, I'm sorry to say."

Bertha was looking keenly at her friend, who remained serenely unconscious of her scrutiny.

"Don't you think so, Sybil?"

"She's rather too thin, and I don't like those great shadows under her eyes, but I'm sure she'll always be a very pretty creature. So like her mother, you know, though I always thought that Mrs. Grantham spoilt herself with those enormous earrings, especially in the country, somehow. I don't quite know," Lady Argent thoughtfully pursued, with an air of far greater interest than any she had bestowed on the subject of Rosamund's looks, "why it is that I have always disliked earrings. I do so hope it isn't prejudice, which I always think so very narrow-minded and shocking. But I never could bear the picture of St. Cecilia that everyone likes so much because of those great things hanging from her ears. Sitting at the organ, dear, you know. Though I've no doubt it was the fashion, and quite proper and everything in those days, and in that country."

"My dear Sybil! Surely Cecilia was a Roman virgin? You talk as though she'd lived in some unheard of region."

"Well, I never can remember quite where Tyre and Sidon and Syracuse and all those places are," was Lady Argent's rather surprising reply. "I know St. Paul was always going there, but then he really did travel a great deal, Bertie, even for nowadays. I never can bear to think how dreadfully inconvenient their travelling arrangements must have been then—though, of course, it made it all the more meritorious."

Bertha made a decided effort to turn the conversation from channels which appeared to her unnecessarily Scriptural.

"It's such a comfort to see Rosamund looking better every day. There's nothing like youth, my dear, when all's said and done. After all, in spite of the grief and

trouble which seem so bitter to them, they have everything to look forward to—all life before them. It's a wonderful thing to be young, Sybil."

She sighed.

"I always think that it *depends* so much," said Lady Argent cryptically, and with the diffidence which she always brought to any opinion that differed from her friend's. "But, of course, when I think of Frances, poor little darling, though I can't think why I call her poor, for she's far better off than we are, and must have a much higher place in Heaven than one can ever hope for oneself—but there it is, Bertie, I am quite sure that she was a very privileged soul in every possible way."

"Now I'm going to shock you," declared Bertha with a kind of deliberate enjoyment in her tone, "but I should have had a much higher opinion of Frances if she'd given up her own way and stayed quietly at home until she was of an age to judge for herself. Oh yes, my dear, I know it's a dreadful thing to say now, but I'm nothing if not outspoken, as you know, and I can't pretend—it isn't in me. One looks upon Francie as a little victim, and so she was, poor child, but it was all owing to her own self-will."

Lady Argent flushed, looked doubtful, and then said gently and very characteristically:

"So brave of you, Bertie dear, to be so unconventional and say it all out, because of course I know you loved her just as if she'd been your very own. Only you know it really was a vocation, if ever there was one, and Father Anselm was very much impressed with her, and told me so himself long before there was any question of her entering. Such a very holy man, Bertie, and extremely clever. Plain chant, you know, and all that kind of thing—so wonderful, I always think, though of course I'm no judge at all, since I never really like good music—only tunes I've known all my life, which are not plain chant at all, as you may imagine, since they've only revived it quite within the last few years. The Holy Father wishes it so much, for the Church, which of course makes one like it, though I always think other-

wise, it might strike one as the least little bit dreary. So very little tune, you know."

"Yes, I know what you mean. Sybil, do you know you're getting very discursive!"

"I dare say, dear," said Lady Argent placidly, "a train of thought is such a very difficult thing to follow, I always think—I mean another person's, of course. One's own is naturally easy enough."

Bertha did not look as though she shared this conviction—nor did she where the tangled skein of Lady Argent's meditations was concerned.

"I've got a little train of thought in my own head at the present moment," she said tentatively. "I wonder if you can guess what I'm at, Sybil."

"No, dear, I'm sure I can't. I never was the least bit of good at guessing anything at all. Don't you remember when riddles were so much the fashion, and people were always asking one why did Rider Haggard, and ridiculous questions of that sort? I never could get the answers right, even then, and there was one dreadful thing that dear Fergus was so fond of—about a ton of lead and a ton of feathers. I'm sure you must have heard it, Bertie."

"I don't think so—a ton of lead? Are you sure you don't mean a herring and a half?" laughed Bertha.

"Oh, yes, though I know that one too. The question, I mean—not the answer, of course. But this was something about a ton of lead and a ton of feathers being upset out of a boat or somewhere, into the sea, and which would sink fastest. And, of course, I always answered 'Lead.' Because one knows perfectly well that feathers float and lead sinks. But it always turned out to be the wrong answer."

"My dear Sybil!" Bertie laughed helplessly.

"Yes, indeed," said Lady Argent, still in melancholy retrospect, "I once thought I would be very clever and surprise Fergus—so silly, my dear, because nothing ever surprised dear Fergus, not even when one of the mares had twin foals—he said he'd always expected it all along, which one knows was quite impossible, but so very Scotch of him, wasn't it? Anyhow, one day I thought

I'd get that dreadful riddle answered once and for all, so instead of saying as one naturally would, and as I'm bound to say I'd said quite a dozen times before, that of course the lead would sink soonest, I suddenly said: The feathers. And I dare say it served me quite right, because I certainly didn't in the least see how it could be the right answer, and was only pretending, which I suppose was rather hypocritical of me—but Fergus simply roared with laughter, and told everybody what I'd said for weeks and weeks afterwards."

"Sybil, Sybil, you'll be the death of me." Bertha was absolutely mopping her eyes, streaming from her unaffected merriment.

Lady Argent looked at her affectionately.

"Dear Bertie, I do like to hear your laugh again."

"It is an infectious chuckle, I believe," returned Mrs. Tregaskis; "but I've always had a huge appreciation for the funny side of things. It's helped me all through life, Sybil. I'm not an irreligious woman, though my religion is perhaps not a conventional one, but I really believe the whole of my creed could be embodied in one word: 'Smile!' I do believe in smiling! It cheers others, helps oneself, and is good all round. I don't know to you that good many people, one way or another, have told me they blessed my knack of smiling. I'm sure one laugh is worth ten sermons, very often!"

"Sermons are so often a little difficult to understand," said Lady Argent apologetically. "I sometimes find myself quite hazy in church—though I dare say that's mostly from the long drive, which makes me so dreadfully sleepy."

"You have to go all the way to Chepstow, haven't you?"

"Yes, and dear Ludovic is so angelic about driving me in. Not that he often allows me to go early, but then that's because he thinks it tires me, not because he minds the distance."

"Your relationship is a very beautiful one," said Bertha thoughtfully.

"Oh, my dear, it is!" cried Lady Argent very simply. "I often wonder what I've done to deserve a son like

Ludovic, when I see how dreadfully other people are worried by their children."

She coloured suddenly at the allusion, and then hurried on. "It's not because I've brought him up beautifully or anything of that sort, either. I never could have theories, though I bought hundreds of little books—from the very first day that I knew I was going to have a baby. But I always forgot, and then dear Fergus, who was nothing if not determined—so very Scotch, you know, dear—used to say that little books were all rubbish, and if I wanted to know how to bring up a child, Solomon had said all there was to be said upon the subject. Not that he would ever have laid a finger upon Ludovic himself, you know. The only time the poor darling was ever punished, when he was about six years old, I had to do it myself, with a bedroom slipper. And I cried so dreadfully that Ludovic said in the middle of it: 'It's all right, mummy, don't cry, you're hardly hurting me at all.' So touching, I always thought."

"I sometimes think that bringing up hasn't anything at all to do with it," said Bertha dryly. "I brought up my own child as well as I knew how, and practically brought up the other two girls as well. And look at my Hazel, Sybil. She hasn't one thought for me. She came home when her father died and stayed a week—and her husband came for one night. She was sweet enough and affectionate enough—Hazel's always been that—but do you suppose that I didn't know that the whole of her thoughts were at Marleswood, with Guy and the babies, after the first day or two were over! Perhaps it's natural—but it's very bitter, Sybil. I don't ask for impossibilities—I couldn't have lived with them, and I should never wish to—but they never even suggested it."

Lady Argent said nothing at all, and took Bertha's hand into hers.

"It's the fuss over her marriage that she's never forgotten," said Bertha bitterly, "and yet God knows she can afford to. She's taken her own way, and is happy in it—and her father and I forgave her long ago,

if she wanted forgiveness, for her self-will and disobedience."

There was a long silence.

"Well," said Bertha at last, "Rosamund is the only one who has come back to the old nest after all. Hazel's gone right away from me—I know that well enough, in spite of all her loving letters—and won't ever come back. Little Francie took her own way and followed a will-o'-the-wisp that she thought was the Star in the East, and I tell you, Sybil, that before she'd been in that place six months she was just as remote and far away from us as though she'd been in another world. Why, her very language wasn't ours any longer—her whole scale of values had shifted. . . . Someone who saw her once after she had entered told me it was like talking to someone with a thick wall of impenetrable glass all round. You could see her—but you could never get near . . . never be in touch again. . . ."

"You are nearer now, perhaps," softly said Lady Argent.

"Who knows? But the child that's come back to me is Rosamund. And I shan't fail her, Sybil."

"No, Bertie," said Lady Argent lovingly. "You would never fail her."

"Never," repeated Bertha with curiously intense conviction. "You see, apart from everything else, she's the one of the three that has sought me when other things failed her. It's an appeal that one doesn't forget. I have to give, you know, Sybil. I'm made that way—and Rosamund has every claim on me."

There was silence again, and Bertha only broke it to take her departure with a brisk matter-of-factness that seemed to draw a swift curtain across some intimate threshold to a sanctuary where even her own footsteps seldom penetrated.



### XXX

"HAZEL and the babies are coming for a week," announced Bertha triumphantly.

"How delightful! But oh! dear Mrs. Tregaskis, have you considered where you're going to put them?" urgently demanded Miss Blandflower, wearing an expression of anxiety.

"Ask my landlady, Minnie."

Miss Blandflower's expression, now complicated by the addition of a puzzled smile, was turned towards Rosamund.

"The little balcony room for Hazel, of course, and the spare room is quite large enough for nurse and the baby—but Dickie——"

"He can have a cot in my room," said Dickie's grandmother quickly, "unless Hazel wants him with her. What about a nursery? They'll be out most of the day, in this glorious weather, but it gets dark early; and then for meals——"

"There's the attic," said Rosamund rather slowly. "It's very big and light, and can easily be cleared. It used to be a sort of nursery."

She remained a moment reflective, and Mrs. Tregaskis eyed her kindly and observantly.

"Fancy!" ejaculated Minnie in the silence.

"Yes," said Rosamund, "It makes a very nice room, and there are two windows." She thought to herself that she would rather like the attic, where she and Francie had played together, to be a nursery again.

"You'd rather like it to be a nursery again, wouldn't you?" said Bertha gently.

The attic was made ready, and two days later the engaging Dickie was trotting round it and gazing through the big dormer windows on to the garden below.

Hazel, radiantly pretty and good-humoured, showed

the caressing appreciation and gratitude for the welcome prepared that Rosamund had never known her fail to bestow. She played with the babies, gardened with Minnie, and answered all Bertha's half-tentative questions with the same joyous unreserve of manner. If, in that very unreserve, there was a withholding, Rosamund thought it a most unconscious one. To Rosamund, Hazel gave of her loving ways and impulses freely. Above all, she gave her, by a sort of tender instinct, what Rosamund needed most—the care of Dickie.

It was Dickie who, unknowing enough, completed what Mrs. Mulholland, with her kind, inadequate goodness, had begun after Frances' death.

Rosamund came to realize that, on the day that she received news of Mrs. Mulholland's death. She was in the garden with Ludovic Argent, as so often now, under the big Spanish chestnut from which still hung, stained and creaking, the frayed ropes and wide seat of the swing that had belonged to her and to Frances.

"Mrs. Mulholland is dead," she said, with wet eyes. "She just died in her sleep, on Sunday night. They've written from the convent to tell me."

She handed him the letter quite simply.

Ludovic read the rather set, conventional phrases in which a French nun asked Rosamund's prayers for the repose of the soul of her old friend.

She had been "ready to go" for a long while.

"Yes," said Ludovic. "I remember you told me about that."

"She wondered what the meeting with her husband would be like—after all those years. She talked of dying just as though it was like going on a journey, to some place where people one knew were waiting. She was very matter-of-fact about it. I think Catholics are like that. She said she would take messages from me to Frances—in a sort of way it comforted me very much. It made it seem—not so very far away, after all. I wonder."

She was silent for a moment, and then said almost timidly:

"Do you think perhaps she's given the messages now?"

"Who knows, my dear!" said Ludovic Argent gently.

Watching Rosamund, whose gaze was turned to the dim outline of the Welsh hills, he knew that he loved her, and told himself that he had always known it.

Presently he told her.

"I think I am not capable of any very strong feeling any more," said Rosamund almost childishly, and half apologetically. "I had to tell Morris that."

"You don't care for him!" he asked quickly.

"Oh no," said Rosamund.

"Then may I try to make you care for me?"

"Ludovic, I'll try and explain," said Rosamund, speaking with difficulty, and using his name for the first time. "It has seemed to me that there is only one way for anyone to learn anything—and that is through caring. Francie's love for God, whether one thinks it a mistaken sort or not, made her give up everything and go to the convent—as you know. And it nearly broke my heart, because it took her away from me, and I wanted her to be happy in my way and with me. When I went to see her after she'd actually entered I knew that in some way she'd grown up, while I hadn't—I was still muddling about in chaos, while she'd found a definite anchor. I couldn't understand, and I felt further away from her than ever before. Then, when I went to the convent when she was ill, and they wouldn't let me go to her, I understood all she'd given up. You see, for Francie to do or say anything that would hurt me was the greatest sacrifice that she could ever have offered. When I was in the chapel then, I prayed that she might die. . . .

"It was all such pain and despair as I can't describe—but afterwards, very slowly, I think I've understood a little. There is only one thing which counts, and that's loving—and loving is giving.

"Frances gave one way—her way—and taught me a very little of what it meant.

"But my way is not the same as hers."

"You are giving the things of the spirit," said Ludovic.

"I don't know," said Rosamund with a sort of sob.

"But it's the only way of feeling that Francie and I are not so very far apart after all."

## THE PELICANS

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From the garden below came the voices of Hazel's children, Dickie calling in a shrill, sweet treble.

Rosamund gave a sudden smile, and then it died from her eyes in a rush of overwhelming loneliness.

Ludovic's need was urgent, and he took his advantage. "Rosamund," he said entreatingly.

Her gaze did not leave the far line of the horizon, but very slowly, without turning her head, she gave him her hand.

EXETER, June, 1916.

LONDON, June, 1917.